RESPONSE

Fundamental Research by Means of Laboratory Experiments Is Essential for a Better Understanding of Organizational Justice

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In this paper, it is argued that because the bulk of justice research has employed correlational research methods within real-life situations, we know quite a lot about the effects justice perceptions can have on people in organizations and other situations. Yet, this may have been achieved at the expense of thorough insights into the two most fundamental issues of organizational justice: why do people care about fairness and how are fairness judgments formed? It is proposed that the fundamentals of the why and how of organizational justice should be investigated by means of research methods that are best suited to study fundamental issues: laboratory experiments. © 2001 Academic Press

This is a paper about organizational justice and organizational behavior. I start from the premise that justice processes play a crucial role in organizations. This assumption is based on numerous articles, books, and research studies that have shown that how people are treated in organizations may greatly affect their beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors (see, e.g., Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997; Greenberg, 1990). Indeed, Folger (1984, p. ix) noted "the importance of justice cannot be overstated." Being treated fairly by your organization and the people who work in the organization typically leads to higher commitment to the organization and more extra-role citizenship behavior (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). People who experience unfair treatment, on the other hand, are more likely to leave their jobs, show lower levels of commitment, and may start behaving in anti-normative ways (Greenberg, 1993). Therefore, understanding what people judge to be just and fair and how they react to perceived fairness and justice are key issues for understanding organizational behavior (Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997; Greenberg, 1990, 1993).

Because the norms and values of fairness and justice constitute a fundamental feature of behavior in organizations (and in other situations, for that matter), it should come as no surprise that the issue of justice has received considerable attention from many academic disciplines, each with its own perspectives on the study of organizational justice. This is important because a multi-perspectives approach probably will yield the most thorough insights into the object of study. Furthermore, I argue that because organizational justice is important, it is essential to study it by means of various research methods. Each method has its own strengths and weaknesses, and in my opinion the justice domain will make the most progress if it uses equally all available methods.

Two general classes of research methods are discussed by Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, and Rupp (2001). Cropanzano et al. refer to these as the event and social entity paradigms, but following Cronbach (1957), I call these two methods the experimental paradigm and the correlational paradigm. An essential difference between these two paradigms is that the former uses experimental methods, whereas the latter relies on correlational data. An advantage of experimental methods is that assumptions of causality can be tested. Furthermore, experimental studies, and especially laboratory experiments, provide the researcher with a high degree of control in setting up the kinds of situations needed to investigate fundamental processes. An important disadvantage of lab experiments is that high internal validity may be achieved at the expense of external validity. The mirror image of the experimental paradigm is the correlational approach, in which high external validity may be achieved at the expense of internal validity.

It has been concluded that nowadays the bulk of justice research employs correlational research methods in organizations and other every-day situations (Lind, 1994; Tyler & Lind, 1992; Van den Bos, 1996). This has been crucial for the development of the field and has the advantage that we now have much evidence for the importance of social justice issues in various organizational settings and much information about a large number of justice concepts that affect people's reactions and behaviors in organizations (for overviews, see, e.g., Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg, 1990). In other words, we know quite a lot of *what* is organizational justice. Yet, this may have been achieved at the expense of thorough insights into the two most fundamental issues of organizational justice: *why* do people care about fairness and *how* are fairness judgments formed? Contrary to what is claimed by Cropanzano et al., I argue that we know relatively little about the why and how of social and organizational justice. That is, hard empirical data to answer these two questions is scarce. Further, I am not alone in this conclusion. Ambrose and Kulik (in press), for example, recently argued that relatively little is known about the processes by which fairness judgments are formed. Tyler also argued that we should explore why fairness matters (Tyler, 1990, 1994, 1997; Tyler, DeGoey, & Smith, 1996).

Along the same line, Cropanzano et al. propose that justice can be viewed as a class of motivated behavior. But can we really conclude this on the basis of the current research evidence? Furthermore, are fairness heuristics quickly made

judgments or not? Under what conditions do people make deliberate and effortful judgments (controlled processes) versus quick and efficient, automatic responses (automatic processes)? As concluded by Cropanzano et al., future research is needed to explicate the implications of automatic and controlled decision-making for organizational justice judgments. Research evidence that deals with these and other fundamental issues clearly is needed.

To put it differently, it is my impression that because we are so interested in applied issues—which is a good thing, do not get me wrong—we sometimes forget that we study applications on a somewhat weak basis. Related to this, Lind (1994) concluded that because the bulk of justice studies used correlational methods, the domain is founded upon some untested assumptions of causality.

I propose that the fundamentals of the why and how of organizational justice should be investigated by means of research methods that are best-suited to study fundamental issues: laboratory experiments. We learn more when we do at least some experimentation. I illustrate why it is important to do fundamental research by means of lab experiments by discussing a line of research my colleagues and I have conducted.

WHY PEOPLE CARE ABOUT JUSTICE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING INFORMATION ABOUT TRUST

With regard to the question why fairness is important, fairness heuristic theory proposes that people especially need fairness judgments when they are concerned about potential problems associated with social interdependence and socially based identity processes—problems that are related to what Lind referred to as the fundamental social dilemma (e.g., Lind, 1995). Basically, the fundamental social dilemma concerns the question of whether one can trust others not to exploit or exclude one from important relationships and groups (cf. Tyler & Lind, 1992). Fairness heuristic theory argues that people frequently start looking for fairness information to answer this question.

An important condition in which fairness becomes important is suggested by fairness heuristic theory's assumption that, because ceding authority to another person raises the possibility of exploitation and exclusion, people frequently feel uneasy about their relationship with authorities. Therefore, the theory argues, people look to the fairness of authorities to help them assess the security of their position in a group, organization, or society. In other words, the theory proposes that the most common approach to the resolution of the uncertainty that is caused by having to cede authority, is to refer to impressions of fairness. This suggests one way in which fairness may act as a heuristic: Fairness information is used as a heuristic substitute to decide whether or not an authority can be trusted.

Van den Bos, Wilke, and Lind (1998) conducted two experiments (a scenario experiment and a more traditional, "experiential" lab experiment) that corroborated this line of reasoning. That is, that fairness information should become more important for people when they are not sure about whether they can trust an authority. To investigate this issue we varied in both experiments whether participants knew

that they could trust an authority (trust explicit positive condition), whether they knew that they could not trust the authority (trust explicit negative condition), or whether they had not received any information about whether or not they could trust the authority (trust information absent condition). This was followed, as an example of a fair versus unfair procedure manipulation, by varying whether or not participants were allowed an opportunity to voice their opinion (voice vs no-voice conditions). Main dependent variables in the two experiments were participants' satisfaction with, and judgments of the fairness of, their outcome. As predicted by fairness heuristic theory, people's reactions were affected strongly by procedural fairness information when they did not know whether the authority could be trusted, but they did not use procedural fairness information when they had been informed explicitly that the authority could or could not been trusted.

The results of Van den Bos, Wilke, and Lind (1998) suggest that people may resolve the question how one can trust others not to exploit them or not to exclude them from important relationships by starting to form fairness judgments—as heuristic substitutes—when direct information about authority's trustworthiness is missing. More generally, these findings suggest that one answer to the question why people care about justice is that people do so because they want to find out whether they can trust others not to exploit or exclude them from important relationships and groups. The findings imply that people are especially in need of fairness information when they do not have direct, explicit information regarding whether they can trust others.

One reason these results are interesting is that they can be contrasted with some suggestions made in the social justice literature (cf. Tyler & Lind, 1992) that trust is an antecedent of procedural justice judgments, not a moderator of procedural justice effects. Another reason for the importance of these findings is that previous work (e.g., Brockner & Siegel, 1996) focused on valenced trust as opposed to the distinction between unknown trust and valenced trust (cf. Van den Bos et al., 1998).

This latter distinction is important because the discovery of the distinction between unknown trust and valenced trust (done in the Van den Bos et al., 1998, experiments) made it possible to take another look at the relation between trust and organizational justice. That is, after the Van den Bos et al. (1998) findings, researchers could set out to investigate whether effects of unknown versus valenced trust can be found in organizational settings. Empirical data suggested this to be the case; for example, when parents were interviewed about an organization responsible for their child's day care, Van den Bos and Van Schie (1998) found respondents' judgments about the organization's reliability were affected more strongly by their perceptions of the organization's procedures if they were uncertain about the organization's trustworthiness than if they had favorable information about the organization's trustworthiness. These results are in correspondence with those of the Van den Bos et al. experiments and suggest that our line of reasoning also may hold in organizational domains. Future research should investigate other domains of social behavior and different operationalizations of trust to find out

the generalizability of these effects, but I think that it is safe to conclude that the findings show new and refined insights into why fairness matters.

CONCLUSIONS

This rather elaborate discussion of the Van den Bos et al. (1998) experiments and the Van den Bos and Van Schie (1998) survey was inserted to illustrate that by means of experiments researchers can come up with new, previously unidentified research topics. These issues may not be discovered with other research methods because experiments by definition make distinctions between different kinds of situations. Correlational methods, on the other hand, focus on investigating strengths of relationships. Furthermore, laboratory experiments' main goal is to advance theoretical insights, whereas correlational methods tend to focus on applied issues. Thus, the two research methods pay attention to different types of research questions.

The above-described trust studies suggest that lab experiments are extremely helpful in discovering distinctions between unknown versus known trust situations. Previous trust studies (primarily using correlational methods) did not detect this distinction. After having identified effects in lab experiments (as was done in Van den Bos et al., 1998), researchers can start looking for these effects in other situations (as was done in the Van den Bos and Van Schie, 1998, survey).

I argue that laboratory methodologies serve an essential, crucial role in the study of organizational justice. It is understandable why researchers whose primary interest is in people in organizations are not driven by a natural curiosity to find out about results obtained in lab experiments in which college students react to somewhat artificial, experimenter-created situations. But just as fundamental researchers should be aware that social scientific endeavors entail more than college students' reactions and should be willing to pay close attention to applied research findings, scientists with applied interests should realize that fundamental research by means of laboratory experiments is essential for a better understanding of organizational justice.

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