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Concept of Organizational Justice in the Context of Academic Achievement

The aim of this paper is to introduce and empirically validate the applicability of the concept of organizational justice, developed by Greenberg for the purpose of studying in organizational settings, into a domain of students` achievement. As organizational justice refers to the perception of fairness in working context and has an influence on other organizational aspects including work outcomes, it is reasonable to presume a relation between the perceived justice in school with achievements in school, and later at university. Theoretical considerations of the paper include acknowledging particularities of the organizational justice construct, its multidimensionality and dependability on different situational and personality variables. Also, some results from previous research that linked justice theory with academic achievement are presented. Two main hypotheses were tested empirically using a modified Colquitt`s four dimensional scale (Colquitt, 2001) expanded with 30 items of actual unjust experiences in the school setting. The first hypothesis, referring to the positive correlation between all dimensions of justice with school achievement, is proven, while the second, where positive correlation between justice perception and university grades were expected, was significantly correlated only for the distributive aspect of organizational/school justice. Two concurrent explanations for these findings were offered, one based on postulates of equity theory and specifics of educational settings, and the other focusing on a lack of correlation between university grades and procedural, interpersonal and informational justice that was assessed according to the high school experiences. So, it was presumed that these experiences are more situational and therefore less transferrable to a new context. Finally, some dilemmas concerning the construct were mentioned with the purpose to open questions for further research that would clarify and enrich the topic.

Keywords: organizational justice, distributive justice, procedural justice, interpersonal justice, informational justice, academic achievement

1. Introduction

In this paper there is an endeavor to apply the concept of organizational justice, well known and mainly established in organizational settings, in new domain of interest. As a matter of fact, organizational justice, introduced by Greenberg (Greenberg, 1987), and originally created in the domain of organizational behavior could be seen in a new perspective as a more complex and interdependent factor, as some contemporary researches imply (O`Neill, at al., 2011; Rupp, 2011). Even Colquitt (Colquitt, 2006), one of the scholars, most engaged not only in theoretical but also in empirical conceptualization of the phenomenon, has recently hinted that the notion of organizational justice could be abridged by some personal variables applicable on a non organizational environment.

Also, there is an ongoing debate of multidimensionality of construct, with the two, three or even four factor models of organizational justice (Cropanzano, 1997). Here, we adopt the four factor model of justice (Colquitt, 2001) and try to apply it and validate it in a context of academic achievement.

In one word, organizational justice is a construct that explains an individual experience in an organizational setting in terms of fairness based on situational and personal factors (Colquitt, 2006) with evident consequences on employees behavior (Cropanzano, 1997). Therefore, it is a well established and valuable concept in lot of studies, sometimes as a predictor of organizational outcomes (Zapata-Phelan, et. al, 2009),

sometimes as a consequent variable of other organizational factors (Liao, Rupp, in press), but mainly as a moderator between concrete behavior and more fundamental personality dimensions (O`Neill, et. al, 2011).

2. Content and multidimensionality of Organizational justice concept

Organizational justice is a term mainly used in research in the domain of organizational behavior where it is concerned with the ways in which employees perceive fairness of treatment at the workplace and its influence on other organizational aspects: work attitudes, satisfaction, work outcomes, perception of their supervisors (Moorman, 1991). Studies of organizational justice revealed that a distinction should be made between at least two, three, or even four dimensions of justice (Greenberg, 1987). Distributive justice refers to the perception of fairness of work outcomes an employee receives (Cronpanzano, 1997). Even when the outcome is perceived as fair, the way used to reach that result may be unfair. So, procedural justice assesses the extent to which the system that determines work outcomes is accurate, consistent, correctable, unbiased, representative, based on prevailing ethical standards and open to employee input (elements of fairness) (Greenberg, 1987). Sometimes, this formal aspect is seen as independent from the perception of the way that employees are treated in concrete communication during the implementation of the procedure, so interactional justice is seen as one more dimension of organizational justice, describing the level of respect and dignity in the employee's treatment by the authority figures (Zainalipour, 2010). The third organizational justice dimension is occupied with the fairness of interpersonal treatment received during the implementation of a procedure and emphasizes the importance of truthfulness, honesty, sensitivity, respect and justification as fairness criteria of interpersonal communication (Erdogan, 2002). In this facet of justice, researchers often see two distinct aspects, interpersonal that captures the sincerity and respectfulness of authority communication and informational justice that is concerned with the use of open and adequate explanations for decisions (Colquitt, 2001).

The multidimensionality of organizational justice construct is justified by the research which show that, although all dimensions refer to the role of fairness, they have diverse impact and personal and organizational correlates (Zainalipour, 2010; Cohen-Charash, Specter, 2001). Briefly, distributive justice is proven to be related to the personal-referenced outcomes (pay satisfaction, promotion satisfaction, individual self-concept), while procedural justice was found to relate to system-references outcomes (organizational commitment, loyalty towards organization, cooperation, task, supervisor and coworker satisfaction, trust in organization, willingness to exert effort on behalf of organization, lower absenteeism and turnover tendencies and interactional justice was regularly linked with organizational citizenship behavior and trust towards supervisor (DeConinck, 2010). Research also suggests that employees evidently make a distinction between fairness of organizations and supervisors (Rupp, Cropanzano, 2002: Erdogan, 2002).

Theoretically and methodologically, organizational justice is commonly conceptualized as a three-imensional construct, others combine interactional with procedural because of their high inter-correlations and similar consequences (Cronpanzano, 1997),while Greenberg (1987) and Colquitt, (2001) suggest a four-factor structure due to the idea that the respect and sensitivity aspects might be viewed as interpersonal facets of distributive justice as they have a potential to alter reactions to decision outcomes and can compensate unfavorable outcomes.

However, empirical studies gave inconsistent results regarding the dimensionality of the organizational justice concept arguing that employees often consider fairness issues in a holistic manner. As a matter of fact, recent research indicated that overall justice predicts overall job satisfaction better than specific justice dimensions and influence some other organizational phenomena (Holtz, Harold, 2009). It is obvious that specific justice dimensions influence overall justice but the question remains whether it is useful to make a differentiation between them and to what extent every dimension participates in a general construct. Nevertheless, according to Johnson (2006), various theorists agree that justice is anything from a single dimension to four dimensions.

3. Personal and organizational correlates of Organizational justice

Greenberg (1987) identified organizational justice as a construct that has a potential to explain many organizational behavioral outcome variables. *Moorman (1991) says that organizational justice conceptualizes "ways in which employees determine if they have been treated fairly in their jobs, and the ways in which those determinations influence other work-related variables" (p.845).*

As has been said previously, organizational justice has been constantly related to organizational decision making (van den Bos, 2002), job and organizational satisfaction (Rezaiean, et al., 2010; Zainalipour, et. al, 2010; Johnson, et al. 2006), organizational citizenship behavior (Rezaiean, et al, 2010), organizational commitment (Rezaiean, et al, 2010; Johnson, et al, 2006), trust (Johnson, Lord, 2010; DeConinck, 2010), job and task performance and work outcome (Liao, Rupp, in press; Zapata-Phelan, et. al, 2009), achievement (Peter, et al., 2012; Elovainio, et al., 2011), contraproductive work behavior (O`Neill, et. al, 2011; Johnson, Lord, 2010), leader-member relations (DeConinck, 2010; Johnson, et al., 2006). Cohen-Charash and Spector (2001) also recognized the importance of differentiating forms of justice, since they are *related yet distinct constructs*.

Although organizational justice has been shown to have behavioural consequences, there remains a surprising amount of variation in how individuals react to fair and unfair treatment (Colquitt, 2006). Therefore, Rupp (2011) insists that understanding of justice phenomenon is not possible without concerning individual differences, affective, cognitive and social processes, as well as contextual influences and all that in the proper time perspective. Johnson and associates (2010; 2006) gave an empirical evidence that justice is inseparable from one`s self-concept due to the fact that individuals perceive fairness based on specific aspects of self. He argues (et al, 2006) that "*justice concerns become salient when the self and some aspects of it are engaged*" (p. 176). He goes further and finds that activation of self-identity mediated the effects of justice on trust and on cooperative, as well as on counterproductive behaviour (Johnson, Lord, 2010). Different studies take different personal variables into account with the idea to recognize the most influential dimension of personality (Colquitt, 2006), as well as the specific power of construct compared with other factors (O`Neill, 2011; Colquitt, 2006). For example, Colquitt (2006) analyses the effects of the big five dimensions (conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, extraversion), trust propensity, risk aversion, equity sensitivity and trait morality, while O`Neill (2011) adds honesty-humility trait to the big five dimensions.

Also, there is an endeavour to study the effects of motivational factors in their mediating role between justice and task performance (Zapata-Phelan, et al., 2009). On the other hand, some scientists analyse the role of affects on perception of fairness in treatment (Barsky, Kaplan, 2007).

4. Organizational justice and academic achievement – empirical approach

The aim of this research is to test the idea that organizational justice could be applied in a context of academic achievement, along with questioning (reassessing) the narrow perception of potential cast on it, as some could infer from the previous field of research and theoretical frameworks, as well as from the existing instruments measuring the concept.

Although literature is full of research on organizational justice in a work context, there are only few examples of implementing it in a school (Elovainio, et al., 2011; Zainalipour, et al, 2010; Horan, Myers, 2009) or academic environment (Berti, et al., 2010), especially concerning its relation with student achievements (Peter, et al, 2012).

In the recent research of Peter and associates (2012), it was found that teachers` experience of organizational justice mediate students` achievement by promoting the atmosphere favorable for the development of a personality disposition variable of believing in a just world. Elovainio et al. (Elovainio, et al. 2011) used organizational justice as a dimension of the psychosocial work climate in a school setting. They assumed that perceived justice among school personnel might be a potentially important predictor of overall school atmosphere that could have some impact on students` achievement, satisfaction, absenteeism and their well-being. Results prove that a low level of relational justice among teachers was in correlation with poor academic performance and absenteeism, and frequency of psychosomatic and depressive symptoms as well.

The important findings for this research are the results of several studies concerning schools and academic context that showed the importance of justice perception for some aspects of students` life. While distributive justice, defined as the allocation of educational outcomes affects learning motivation and well-being (Dalbert, Maes, 2002), procedural justice affects motivation, rule compliance and trust toward teachers (Chory-Assad, 2002). Since consistent with the researches in social justice, these results are sort of confirmation of the idea that organizational justice is an applicable concept in other settings than organization.

Accordingly, the main goal was to bring the concept originally defined in organizational psychology and applied mainly in human resource management domain into connection with academic performance. So, we have tried to find if there is a correlation between the perception of organizational justice in high school, and measures of high school and faculty achievements (grades).

Organizational justice is operationally defined by four subscales of distributive, procedural, interpersonal and informational justice (Colquitt, 2001). The variable of academic achievement is measured by the average grades at the end of the first semester at the faculty and then analyzed relative to the organizational justice assessments and high school achievement. We were interested in possible effects of organizational justice in high school on later academic achievements (at university). Although the nature of that particular relation is not a subject of this paper, it is possible that experience from the high school could shape a subsequent attitude towards other educational settings. Also, we should not forget the impact of broader dispositional variables that could explain potential covariance of achievement and justice perception. In both cases a link between school justice and academic achievement is expected.

In this particular study we hypothesized that:

Hyp.1. there is a positive correlation between high school achievement and all four dimensions of school justice; previous research of organizational justice and achievements, especially in an educational context supports this hypothesis (Elovainio, et al., 2011; Zainalipour, Fini, Mirkamali, 2010)

Hyp.2. there is a positive correlation between academic achievement and all four dimensions of school justice; although there are only few studies that analyze a possible influence of justice on later achievement in another organization (Peter, et al., 2012), we believe that it might be useful to explore this possible relation.

5. Method

5.1 Participants and procedure

The participants were 253 first year students of the Faculty of Organizational Sciences, drawn from different departments, who were taking psychology course during school year 2011/2012. The mean age of the sample was 19.2 years. 138 participants were female and 115 male (54.5% women). They received a course credit for participation in the psychological research. Participants were guaranteed protection of their personal data and identity, so the answering sheets were coded (signed by number codes).

Students completed a 50 item school justice scale (Kovacevic&Zunic, 2011) based on the Colquitt organizational justice scale (Colquitt, 2001), and adapted for the school setting. Participants also completed a questionnaire regarding demographical data and their high school grades.

5.2 Measures of school justice

20 items were based on the Colquitt organizational justice scale (Colquitt, 2001) grouped into four factors: procedural justice (7 items), distributive justice (4 items), interpersonal (4 items) and informational justice (5 items). These items were adapted for the school context. There were 30 original, new items related to specific examples of unjust treatment in high school (measuring justice on its negative extreme for school context – perceived teachers' misconduct). This subscale was based on the results of preliminary research in which we obtained spontaneous reports from students based on their negative experience in school. After the content analysis, typical themes were transformed into a Likert type scales. Finally, we had a 50 five-level Likert type items scale, with five subscales, measuring school justice. Demographical questionnaire consisted of items regarding sex, age, previous school and school type, previous place of residence and high school accomplishment (grades). Average university grades after first semester were obtained from the faculty database.

Table 1 provides the reliability indicators of newly introduced school justice measure – school specific unjust events scale. Cronbach's Alpha and Gutmman's Lambda coefficients are presented.

Table 1: Reliability of specific unjust events scale

	No.of cases	No.of items	α	λ 1	λ 2	λ 3	λ 4	λ 6	λ 7
Valid	252	30	0.863	0.801	0.870	0.863	0.863	0.851	0.887
Omit.	1								

Conclusively, the reliability of the newly introduced scale is good. It was actually somehow surprising to register that the level of internal consistency, considering that specific items of the scale are not at all redundant and refer to very specific, different events or particular examples of unjust (unfair) teachers' conduct.

6. Results

6.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 2 provides the means, standard deviations for all school justice scales. Interpersonal and distributive justice scales manifested significant deviations from normal distribution (Z = 1.934, p <.01, and Z = 1.63 p <.01 respectively, Kolmogorov–Smirnov test for normality of the distribution) so they were treated non-parametrically for subsequent analyses.

Table 2: The means and standard deviations for school justice scales

Scale	Mean	Standard deviation
Procedural justice	3.45	0.60
Distributive justice	**3.68**	0.75
Interpersonal justice	3.76	0.69
Informational justice	3.85	0.72
Specific unjust treatment	3.14	0.69

Table 3 provides the frequencies of school achievement categories. The selection effect of university admission criteria diminished the variance of high school grades (the result is the absence of cases in fair and poor categories in our sample) and the distribution was not assumed normal.

Table 3: Frequencies of school achievement categories

High school achievement	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Exceptional (max. average marks)	54	21.3 %
Excellent	130	51.4 %
Very Good	65	25.7 %
Good	4	1.6 %
Fair	0	0 %
Poor	0	0 %
Total	253	100 %

The average students grade after the first semester was **8.06** (M=8.06; SD=0.997). Kolmogorov–Smirnov test for normality of the distribution showed significant deviation Z = 2.013, p < .01 as a consequence of a relative peak in the number of failed or missed exams (which was actually expected considering a short time spent at university - after one semester at the faculty).

Table 4 provides a correlation matrix between high school achievement, average university grades and school justice scales. Because of the obtained results of normal distribution testing, only nonparametric Spearman's rank correlation is presented here (although Pearson correlation coefficient gave similar figures)

Table 4: Organizational justice, high school and academic achievement correlations

		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
Achievement	1.High school		0.38 **	0.19**	0.43 **	0.14 *	0.19 **	0.15 *
	2.University	0.38 **		0.10	0.30 **	0.07	-0.01	0.06
School justice	3.Procedural	0.19**	0.10		0.48**	0.58 **	0.60 **	0.55 **
	4.Distributive	0.43 **	0.30 **	0.48**		0.35 **	0.46**	0.42 **
	5.Interpersonal	0.14 *	0.07	0.58 **	0.35 **		0.48**	0.56**
	6.Informational	0.19 **	-0.01	0.60 **	0.46**	0.48**		0.53**
	7.Specific unjust events	0.15 *	0.06	0.55 **	0.42 **	0.56**	0.53**	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Significant correlations were found between high school achievement and all dimensions of school (organizational) justice: rho=.19; p<.01, with procedural justice, rho=.43; p<.01 with distributive justice, rho=.14; p<.05 with interpersonal justice, rho=.19; p<.01 with informational justice, rho=.15; p<.05 with subscale of specific unjust events. On the other hand, university achievement, that is in a significant correlation with the high school achievement (rho=.38; p<.01), is in correlation only with distributive justice (rho=.30; p<.01). the obtained relation between academic achievements with only distributive justice may imply a more stable character of the phenomenon. This is an interesting finding considering the fact that two different educational settings are in question. It seems that the perception of distributive justice created in the high school was somehow transferred to new academic environment. Although it seems to be in a collision with the results of previous research where the more pervasive character of procedural justice was found, it is sound when we consider that the research was conducted in the same organization. Here, achievement was measured in two completely different organizations at the moment of transition – during the first semester.

6. Discussion and ideas for further research

The whole study was based on the idea that the concept of organizational justice is applicable in education and relevant for assessment of the effects of justice perception on educational outcomes. As school justice was differentiated into four dimensions of justice: procedural, distributive, interpersonal and informational (Colquitt, 2001), we analyzed the correlations between achievement and all four aspects. Also, we created one new subscale designed for measuring school injustice experience – consisting of specific examples of unjust treatment and teachers' misconduct.

In concordance with the previous research findings we postulated the existence of a positive relation between justice measured in school context and educational achievement (Peter, et al., 2012; Elovainio, et al., 2011; Zainalipour, Fini, Mirkamali, 2010). Two hypotheses were specified: the positive correlation between school justice and school achievement (hyp.1.), and the positive correlation between school justice and university grades (hyp.2.).

The former hypothesis is confirmed for all five subscales, with the highest correlation intensity between distributive justice and school achievement. This is not surprising if we understand the concept of distributive justice which is by definition directly related to work outcomes (grades in school context). Also, this is consistent with the previous research in an academic context, where the authors analyze distributive justice in the framework of learning motivation and well-being effects on educational results (Berti, et. al, 2010). The perception of justice in an educational context is mainly determined by the estimation of a relative proportion between the learning effort and the result, as well as with some social referent (Cropanzano,

1997). For such a strong correlation among distributive justice and high school achievement, at least two different explanations arise. Unlike the organizational situation, where outcomes of referent to compare are not always transparent, in the school surroundings, performance and rewards of others are more visible and susceptible to reassessment. So, direct comparison and injustice awareness are easier. Another possibility is that students interpret fairness mainly according to their own outcomes. If they achieve more, they tend to perceive situations as more just. Also, it is possible that low performers rationalize their position evoking the injustice. On the other hand, in some previous research (Horan, Myers, 2009), interpersonal and informational justice, were seen as the most important determinants of fairness in the classroom context. We found that the correlation between school achievement and procedural justice could be explained by motivation as a potential mediator (Zapata-Phelan, et al. 2009), where those who believe that teachers` practice is inconsistent, inaccurate, biased, unethical and closed to students' input are prone to be less motivated and consequently less successful. The possible impact of one`s abilities cannot be ruled out, so this relation could be at least partly explained by a mechanism of rationalization. Similar concurrent explanations are feasible for other two dimensions of school justice: interpersonal, that refers to the fair treatment in direct communication with school personnel and informational, that implies the use of adequate and prompt clarifications for school decisions and demands.

The latter hypothesis is also confirmed but only for distributive justice. Academic achievement is found to be in a positive correlation with the perception of the distributive justice during the previous educational period. This temporal stability of association between educational outcome and distributive justice factor across the different educational surroundings could be explained by the fact that other justice dimensions are situational specific and dependent on concrete interpersonal treatment, in contrast with the distributive justice which is always focused on outcomes (rewards and punishments). At school and university outcomes are very similar. Hence, the transfer of experience among two settings is facilitated. One plausible explanation might include an existence of broader and more stable personal disposition that is connected with both phenomena.

A more stable manifestation of procedural justice compared to distributive justice reported earlier by Saunders and Thornhill (2003) should be understood as an indicator of different study circumstances. Measures of procedural justice were compared in the same organization at different time points. Our assessment of procedural justice referring to the school experience was acquired retrospectively at the first semester of university education. On the other hand, in our study, outcome measures represent the school and university achievement as well.

Procedural, interpersonal and informational justices are not in a significant relation with university achievement, as well as the scale of specific unjust events. The absence of this relation might be against the interpretation of direct and durable motivational effect of negative experience during the high school on a later attitude towards subsequent education. Their too specific and situational character is likely to be responsible for the low levels or lack of correlation with outcomes. Nevertheless, this problem of situational or dispositional nature of organizational justice and its relationship with different organizational constructs is beyond the scope of this discussion but could be an object of further research, especially because two measures of achievement, school and university grades are also significantly interrelated. It additionally emphasizes a possible importance of dispositional variables impact on those phenomena.

Eventually, there are some ideas for further research. Dispositional measures derived from cognitive ability, as well as from the personality, especially those previously mentioned, should be included in the analysis of the organizational justice concept. The main idea is not to reduce this concept to more basic constructs but to clarify its relative impact on consequent variables in a comparison with those constructs. In the educational context there are inspirations to test the stability of measures at later periods of studies and to include other aspects of student behavior (cooperation, cheating, dropping out), similar to the behaviors already studied in the organizational context (organizational citizenship behavior, counterproductive work behavior, etc).
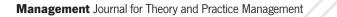
Conslusion

Using academic achievement as an outcome variable, this research demonstrated the viability and applicability of the organizational justice construct in a specific context of educational organization. However, peculiarities in organizational conditions gave rise to somehow different accent regarding components of organizational justice. Namely, strong focus on grades and more transparent, frequent and sharpened comparison with other pupils in school (than it is usual in the work organization with coworkers), brings a distributive aspect of justice in the forefront of school justice perception, relative to procedural, interpersonal and informational facets.

Also, an interesting finding of the temporal stability of the phenomenon - persistency of association between distributive justice perception in school and later achievement, even after transfer to university, brings possible concurrent explanations in consideration. Whether there is exceptionally strong negative motivational effect of perceived unfair grading, or, which we find more plausible, some more fundamental dispositional variables (cognitive abilities and/or personality traits) can explain a co-variation between later university achievement and the school justice perception. Apart from dispositional measures, further research should include other behavioral outcome variables, relevant for the educational context (student cooperation, cheating, dropping out, etc).

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