

UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEE PERCEPTION OF FAIRNESS AT WORKPLACE: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract. This is a pioneering study in India. The study investigated the employee perception of fairness as a total concept at the workplaces of a multiple public and private organizations of Delhi national capital region, selected by convenience sampling method. The employee perception of fairness or the organizational justice scenario was studied and compared in public and private sector organizations. The study used two methods to determine the sample size: Krejcie and Morgan's sample size selection table and Cochran's formula for sample size calculation. Some 400 mid-managerial level employees from both public and private sectors participated in the study. In addition to 8 questions on demographic factors, the structured survey questionnaire of 20 questions a renowned scholar of justice studies was administered to collect the data from the respondents. To ensure reliability of the data for analysis, Cronbach alpha value was calculated of the individual items on the questionnaire and the scores were above the tolerance level. The data analysis was done on SPSS 25.0 version. The analysis found positive employee perception of fairness in both the sectors. The result found was inconsistent with our hypothesis of negative perception keeping the grim scenario of the workplaces in view. The inconsistent result led to some new insights emerging from the study. The researcher observed job insecurity, pessimism, and high discreet behaviour of the respondents particularly in the private sector. In public sector, the respondents were noticed to be indifferent and there was no consensus in their views.

Keywords: *organizational justice, distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice, workplace fairness*

Introduction

In an organization, the employees usually compare themselves with their co-workers and form (un)fairness perceptions based on their observation and experience vis-à-vis organizational policies and practices. The discussions at the workplace be that related to pay, rewards, recognition, promotion, training, performance evaluation, quality of work life or any other issues, mostly revolve around the issues of fairness. Such discussions reflected either their satisfaction and positive response or conversely their stress and frustration eventually leading to indiscipline and deviant behaviour at the workplace. Evidently, the importance of justice at the workplace could not be over-emphasized as it lay at the core of all issues be that related to allocation of rewards, participation of workers in management, delegation of authority, assignment of responsibility, the process of decision making or any other organizational matters. '*Justice is the first virtue of social institutions*' wrote John Rawls so rightly, the famous political philosopher of twentieth century. As a matter of fact, the issue of (un)fairness in the organization is nothing new though the coining and the introduction of the term '*Organizational Justice*' (OJ) and its study has not been there for long in the academic world in the research. The subject is studied extensively in developed nations in the last few decades but limited studies are found in India. Hence, it seemed important to undertake the study. The study was conducted in several public and private sector organizations in Delhi NCR region and a comparison was done on the justice perception of employees in both sectors. The words *justice* and *fairness* are used interchangeably

here following prevailing practice in most of the justice literatures (Colquitt et al., 2005).

In India, the unemployment and job insecurity are excessively high and therefore unfair scenarios at the workplaces particularly in the unorganized sector are quite common. More than 92% of the workforces in India are engaged in informal jobs both in organized and unorganized sectors. In the unorganized sector, the workers are hired on the basis of temporary contracts, daily wages, without job security and modest working conditions. So, a study on organizational justice in the informal sector would have resulted in obvious conclusions of gross unfairness. Hence, the study was focused on the formal or organized sector that often claimed to have adopted fair human resource practices and ideal standards for its employees. The question was to find if everything fair and ideal in the formal sector? The fact is that the formal sector that comprised of both public and private entities, held more than 9% of informal jobs and those workers did not have any security or employment benefits. The Confederation of Indian Industry (Srija and Shirke, 2012) studied the labour market in India and uncovered the routine practice of informal employment in the organized sector. Withal, the International Labour Organization reported significant increase of informal workers in the recent times in organized sector (Saha and Verick, 2016). There have been numerous instances of white-collar employees hired without written contracts, social security and other benefits. Yet, one could not still conclude the said scenario 'as the complete picture' in the formal sector in India as many organizations claimed that they provided equal opportunity and ensured quality of work life of their employees. Even, some of these organizations have been regarded as ideal employers. However, the researcher could not find any study on these organizations on the subject of organizational justice.

Therefore, the study focused on the workplaces of some of the large public and private sector organizations in Delhi NCR region. It sought to understand the perception of fairness of the managerial employees of these organizations against their organizational policies and practices, compensation structures, decision-making processes, interpersonal relationship etc. In India, very few studies were carried out to find the impact of organizational justice on employee behavior, work-related outcomes but mostly with small samples collected from a single organization. The researcher could not find any comparative study on the subject between public and private sector based on data from more than one organization. Therefore, the researcher saw a great need and undertook this comparative study.

Objective of the study

The objective of the study can be divided into two, namely: (1) to investigate the general perceptions of the employees on Organizational Justice in the selected public and private sector organizations of Delhi NCR region; and (2) to suggest innovations, based on research findings in order to improve Organizational Justice scenario in the organizations. To answer the objectives, the study was conducted using the structured questionnaire of a renowned justice scholar that comprised of 20 questions on various dimensions of OJ. In addition, 8 questions on demographic variables were also included. Research design, related details including the demographic factors is being discussed under Research Methodology.

Literature review

Organizational justice

The concern for justice in the organizations as well as for the people antedated the formal introduction of the concept and study of *organizational justice* (OJ). First, the American author Wendell L. French, in his book *The Personnel Management Process*, wrote on organizational fairness in 1964 (Cropanzano and Stein, 2009). Wendell French reviewed the two-factor justice theory of Aristotle on distributive and rectificatory justice. French was writing a personnel management textbook and he reviewed an ancient philosopher's writings that related better to social justice. Obviously, he used the empirical literatures available then. It is interesting that the same author Cropanzano, who referred to the study of Wendell French, wrote along with his colleague Byrne another article that Prof. Jerald Greenberg coined the exact term *organizational justice* in 1987 (Byrne and Cropanzano, 2001).

As a matter of fact, many justice researchers also subscribed to this view and gave credit to Greenberg for founding the concept and for holding extensive research on the subject. Thus, it is evident that though Wendell French first wrote about the issues of fairness in personnel management in his book, it was Jerald Greenberg (1987) who coined the term of Organizational Justice to refer to people's perception of fairness in the organization (Fortin, 2008). Research studies on justice at workplace, grew significantly after 1987 (Colquitt, 2008). The meta-analytic study of Cohen-Charash and Spector (2001) clarified that most of the justice studies were published after 1990. Byrne and Cropanzano (2001) recorded in their study that research on justice assumed substantial speed in 1980s. Thus, most of the justice literature referred 1980s as the beginning of the study of OJ perhaps due to the facts that its major dimensions were already introduced by this time, and Greenberg had already introduced the exact phrase of OJ in that decade and that had inspired relevant research studies to flourish thereafter. Justice literature indicated that the idea of fairness in the organizations was derived from the Equity theory of Adams (1963). French used the concept first in 1964 and emphasized on fairness issues in personnel management but the subject drew attention of the researchers only after Greenberg (1987) coined the term *Organizational Justice* and wrote extensively on employee perception of fairness at the workplaces

Dimensions of organizational justice

The employee perceptions of (un)fairness emerged primarily from the faulty employer-employee relationship. The management promoted some employees in quick succession, provided rewards, and better access to resources while some others did not get enough attention that caused their slow growth. This sort of unequal treatment usually bred the perception of unfairness. The attention of the researchers was therefore drawn first towards the fair distribution of resources in the organizations (Colquitt et al., 2005) which has been called since ancient times as *distributive justice*. Right from 1950s, this had captured the interest of the researchers for almost three succeeding decades. Eventually, this was known as the first dimension of organizational justice. So, the research on organizational justice initially focused on the fairness of allocation of resources, which is known as *distributive justice*, based on the well-known *equity theory*. Under the theory, the individual perceived his outcome as fair if his contribution matched with the contribution and outcome of others. Other researchers like Deutsch (1975) and Leventhal (1976) advocated that outcome should be distributed as per need and same outcome should be given to all. Miller (2001) stated that outcome should be

distributed on the basis of *need, equity* and *equality*. As research advanced on distributive justice, the scholars realized that it was not able to explain all the issues at the workplace and catered to the organizational outcomes only. Therefore, they began to look for other dimensions of organizational justice.

In 1974, social psychologist John Thibaut and a law professor Laurens Walker, along with a few other researchers, published two articles on *procedural justice* in conflict resolution. Thereafter, 1975 and 1978 witnessed the publication of two more classic works of Thibaut and Walker viz. '*Procedural Justice: A Psychological Analysis*' and '*A Theory of Procedure*'. All these four publications ignited the emergence of the concept of *procedural justice* in social psychology (Byrne and Cropanzano, 2001). Thibaut and Walker introduced the concept of *procedural justice* in legal arena but it was Leventhal et al. (1980) who introduced the said concept in organizational context (Colquitt et al., 2001). Leventhal (1976) who had criticized the equity theory noting that it had disregarded the aspect of procedures in the distribution of allocation, introduced his detailed study in 1980 entitled '*What should be done with equity theory?*' and it provoked continued research on procedural justice in 1980s and early 1990s. In his study, Leventhal noted that procedural justice was much more than process control concept of Thibaut and Walker; and the concept were influenced by other procedures and behaviours (Heffernan, 2012; Lind and Tyler, 1988). Leventhal et al. (1980) argued that people were more concerned about distributive justice compared to procedural fairness. Since procedural justice was intricate and not always easy to comprehend, therefore people might not even give attention to it when the outcome matched their expectations. *Procedural justice* was introduced as the second dimension of Organizational Justice.

Beginning from mid-1980s tentatively until the decade of 2000s, attention of the researchers remained focused on interpersonal aspect of justice and this time span was known as the period of *interactional wave*. Two researchers, Bies and Moag (1986) advocated that in addition to outcome and processes, individuals were also concerned with their interactions with the authorities of the organization at the workplace and their experience affected their perception of fairness. The authors called it as *interactional justice*. Later, Greenberg (1993) proposed that interactional justice should ideally be divided into two categories: *interpersonal* and *informational*. The perception of interpersonal justice was based on the fairness of the treatment the employee received in the course of enactment of processes and distribution of outcomes. And the perception of informational justice was based on truthfulness, justification of the decision, and appropriate explanation for it. Empirical evidence showed that earlier studies supported this four-factor model of justice (Colquitt 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001). Colquitt (2001) and other researchers suggested these two new dimensions of justice have positive impact on behaviour, motivation, and the self-esteem of the employees. In this study, the researcher has examined the employee perception of all the four dimensions of organizational justice-distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational at the workplaces.

Relevant research studies on OJ

Recognizing the indispensability of the role of fairness in securing employee motivation and organizational outcomes, the subject of OJ attracted considerable attention of the researchers over the last few decades. Numerous studies are undertaken on the subject across the world a few relevant research studies are delineated hereunder:

(a) Ramamoorthy et al. (2012) studied the outcome of perceptions of justice in performance evaluation and impartiality in reward systems on employee commitment and tenure intent. The result suggested that both procedural and distributive justice perceptions anticipated both affective and normative commitment, and tenure intent; (b) Past research studies clearly indicated that the perception of organizational justice affected the individual behaviour at the workplaces (Sohn and Shin, 2015; Iqbal et al., 2012); (c) The study of Kumari and Afroz (2013) examined the effect of organizational justice on employee commitment and creative behaviour. The study showed that OJ essentially identified with responsibility and creative behaviour among the employees; (d) Yadav (2016) in her study found that the factors that had significant positive relationship with the Organizational Justice were trust, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviour, performance, work engagement whereas turnover intentions and counterproductive work behaviour, absenteeism and withdrawal, emotional exhaustion demonstrated a negative association with OJ; and (d) Spriha et al. (2016) found that employee competence, commitment and self-motivation depended to a large extent on his perception of fairness. His higher level of fairness perception led to his better performance.

The above studies clearly indicated that higher level of fairness perception led to employee positive behaviour and commitment towards the organization. These clear indications of positive association of OJ with employee behaviour and the grim realities of Indian workplaces prompted us to hypothesize that the employee perception of OJ in the organizations of Delhi NCR region would be negative and not significant. So, the following main hypothesis and four similar sub-hypotheses were framed as OJ had four dimensions.

Hypotheses

H0: General perception of employees in public and private sector organizations on Organizational Justice in Delhi NCR is not significant.

H1: General perception of employees in public and private sector organizations on Organizational Justice in Delhi NCR is significant.

Sub-Hypotheses

H1a: General perception of employees in public and private sector organizations on Distributive Justice in Delhi NCR is not significant.

H1b: General perception of employees in public and private sector organizations on Procedural Justice in Delhi NCR is not significant.

H1c: General perception of employees in public and private sector organizations on Interpersonal Justice in Delhi NCR is not significant.

H1d: General perception of employees in public and private sector organizations on Informational Justice in Delhi NCR is not significant.

Materials and Methods

The first objective of the study was to investigate the general perceptions of the employees on Organizational Justice as a total concept. Though it was a qualitative study designed to understand the employee perceptions, we found the quantitative research technique more convenient to use. This study was based on the survey

questionnaire of 20 questions on all the dimensions of organizational justice. In addition, there were 8 questions on demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status, years of service in the current organization, qualification, type of the organization, monthly income, and family type. The structured questionnaire of justice scholar Prof. Jason Colquitt was used (Colquitt, 2001) in the study. More than 15 organizations both from public and private sector participated in the study and they were selected using convenience sampling method.

More than 600 questionnaires were circulated to scores of organizations and about 475 responses (response rate 79%) were received. Post data collection, filtering was done and incomplete forms were eliminated. Finally, data was available of some 400 respondents both from public and private sectors. Likert scale was used to rate the responses. Two methods were followed to determine the sample size: Krejcie and Morgan's sample size selection table (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970) and Cochran (1963) formula for sample size calculation. Krejcie and Morgan's table suggested a sample size of 384 for 1000000 populations and Cochran's formula also suggested the same sample size for infinite population. Our 400 data points were thus more than enough for the study. The entire analysis was done through SPSS 25.0 version. Cronbach alpha was used to test the reliability of the questionnaire and its individual items. Descriptive statistics was used to condense and understand the nature of demographic data, to investigate their impact on employee fairness of OJ, and to compare the employee perceptions of OJ in the public and private sectors. Finally, to test the hypotheses, one-sample t-test was conducted to understand if the general employee perception of organizational justice in public and private sectors was significant or not.

Results and Discussion

Reliability test

Although the study used a structured questionnaire, yet the reliability test was conducted using Cronbach alpha. The Cronbach alpha scores of organizational Justice data and that of all its four dimensions from 400 data points were calculated. The overall Cronbach alpha value of private organizations was 0.894 and of public organization was 0.887. Both the values were well above the tolerance level of 0.70. Cronbach alpha value for all the individual items in the OJ questionnaire was greater than or closer to the tolerance limit of 0.70 making the data quite reliable for further analysis.

Response assessment

Table 1 indicates the result of Organizational Justice, Distributive Justice, Procedural Justice, Interpersonal Justice and Informational Justice. The analysis of the responses indicated that the perception of organizational justice was higher in public sector employees as 24.4% of their response was in *justice to a very large extent* scale. The employees in private sector rated largely the *justice to a moderate extent* scale. The perception of distributive justice was higher in the public sector employees as % of respondents in *justice to a very large extent* and *large extent* scales were higher than the % of private sector. As regards procedural justice, the spread among all the respondents in public sector was somewhat equal as compared with private sector. Spread of procedural justice in private sector lay in between '*to a large extent*' & '*to a small*

extent'. Although, the opinion was divided, yet fairness perception was found to be higher in private sector organizations. Further, the spread of interpersonal justice among all the respondents in private as well as public sector was similar. However, the employee perception was more positive in public sector compared to private sector. Similarly, in private sector, the perception of informational justice was higher.

Table 1. The dimension of responses towards Organizational Justice, Distributive Justice, Procedural Justice, Interpersonal Justice, and Informational Justice.

Category	N(%)				
	VLE	LE	ME	SE	VSE
Organizational Justice					
(a) Private	29.8 (14.8)	62.9 (31.5)	74.3 (37.1)	26.5 (13.2)	6.9 (3.4)
(b) Public	48.8 (24.4)	63.0 (31.5)	40.2 (20.1)	19.4 (9.7)	28.7 (14.4)
Distributive Justice					
(a) Private	36.0 (18.0)	66.5 (33.3)	68.5 (34.4)	27.0 (13.5)	2.0 (1.9)
(b) Public	58.5 (29.3)	81.3 (40.6)	30.3 (15.1)	10.0 (3.0)	20.0 (10.0)
Procedural Justice					
(a) Private	19.7 (9.9)	56.6 (28.3)	86.4 (43.2)	29.4 (14.7)	7.9 (3.9)
(b) Public	33.1 (16.6)	59.9 (29.9)	44.3 (22.1)	23.3 (11.6)	39.4 (19.7)
Interpersonal Justice					
(a) Private	49.8 (24.9)	57.8 (28.9)	58.3 (29.1)	22.8 (11.4)	11.5 (5.8)
(b) Public	69.3 (34.6)	66.3 (33.1)	26.5 (13.3)	21.5 (10.8)	16.5 (8.3)
Informational Justice					
(a) Private	22.0 (11.0)	73.0 (36.5)	74.6 (37.3)	24.8 (12.4)	5.6 (2.8)
(b) Public	46.4 (23.2)	50.2 (25.1)	53.4 (26.7)	19.6 (9.8)	30.4 (15.2)

Notes: VLE=Very Large Extent; LE=Large Extent; ME=Moderate Extent; SE=Small Extent; VSE=Very Small Extent; N=Frequency; %=Percentage.

Impact assessment of demographic factors on OJ

No significant impact of any demographic factors was found on employee perception of organizational justice in the private and public sector organizations except of the factors of years of service and qualification on the private sector. The P-value of these two demographic variables was less than 0.05. It is implied that those with high qualifications and record number of services in the private sector had high expectations and desired to have a say in the affairs of the organization.

Assessing the employee perception of OJ, and its dimensions

The descriptive statistics of the employee perception of organizational justice and of its various dimensions is given in the table below (Table 2). The results showed that the mean score of public sector organizations (3.48) was slightly higher compared to mean score of the private sector (3.44).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of Organizational Justice, Distributive Justice, Procedural Justice, Interpersonal Justice, and Informational Justice.

Descriptive statistics of the employee perception	Public			Private		
	M	SD	N	M	SD	N
Distributive Justice	3.74	0.78	200	3.54	0.76	200
Procedural Justice	3.12	0.97	200	3.25	0.57	200
Interpersonal Justice	3.75	1.00	200	3.56	0.82	200
Informational Justice	3.31	1.00	200	3.41	0.79	200
Organizational Justice	3.48	0.70	200	3.44	0.57	200

Notes: M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation; N=Frequency.

Furthermore, the table below (Table 3) analyzed the employee perception of OJ and its dimensions through the one sample t-test. The one sample t-test was used to determine whether hypothesized population was significantly different from the sample mean or not. In this case, hypothesized population was significantly different from the sample mean indicating that the statement was significant (P-value ≤ 0.05), This meant that the general employee perception of organizational justice was significant in Delhi NCR region in Public and Private sector organizations. And the null hypothesis was rejected.

Table 3. One sample T-test.

Category		Test value=0					
		t	df	sig.	MD	ID	
						L	U
Private	Distributive Justice	65.926	199	0.000	3.54	3.43	3.64
	Procedural Justice	80.485	199	0.000	3.25	3.17	3.33
	Interpersonal Justice	61.205	199	0.000	3.56	3.44	3.67
	Informational Justice	61.331	199	0.000	3.41	3.30	3.51
	Organizational Justice	67.237	199	0.000	3.44	3.34	3.54
Public	Distributive Justice	67.945	199	0.000	3.74	3.63	3.85
	Procedural Justice	45.296	199	0.000	3.12	2.98	3.26
	Interpersonal Justice	52.993	199	0.000	3.75	3.61	3.89
	Informational Justice	46.909	199	0.000	3.31	3.17	3.45
	Organizational Justice	53.285	199	0.000	3.48	3.35	3.61

Note: t=test statistic; df=degree of Freedom; sig.=Significance (2-tailed); MD=Mean Difference; ID=95% confidence Interval of the Difference.

Our hypothesis was that the employee perception of fairness would be negative and not significant. However, the data analysis showed positive employee perception of fairness in both the sectors, at 95% confidence level, which was inconsistent with our hypothesis. The employee perception of OJ in public sector was found to be slightly better than private sector. A larger number of respondents rated OJ in public sector as very high, the highest category on the Likert scale. Similarly, the employee perception of distributive justice and interpersonal justice in public sector was found to be higher compared to the same in the private sector. And, the employee perception of procedural justice and informational justice was found to be higher in private sector compared to the same in public sector. These results seem to be largely acceptable as in public organizations generally the employees are paid in time and treated with respect whereas in private organizations, due to target pressure, deadlines and stress, there may not be qualitative interpersonal relationship or even the incentives may be getting delayed. However, communication it seemed played a vital role which may have been appreciated by the employees in private sector. Probably this is why the employee perception on procedural and informational justice was found higher in private sector. Nevertheless, data analysis also revealed that a greater number of respondents (83%) held positive views on OJ in private sector compared to public sector numbers (76%). Further, 24% of the respondents in public sector perceived OJ in their organization as poor compared to only 16.6% of the employees who perceived OJ as poor in private

sector. In the final analysis, the views of the respondents in both sectors were largely positive.

However, it was evident that the respondents were quite discreet in expressing their views. It could either be due to high sense of job insecurity or loyalty to the organization. Since the respondents were mid-level managers, therefore it is also likely that they perceived the working conditions differently compared to other employees working in lower level. The fact that many of the respondents were not comfortable to share the names of their organizations clearly indicated the insecurities of the employees. Secondly, there was a sense of pessimism observed particularly in the private sector as regards their working environment.

Nevertheless, for validation of these results, it is suggested that similar studies should be undertaken with bigger samples from multiple organizations. Undertaking similar studies with other categories of employees should be another research area. As evidently, the employees were discreet, it is strongly recommended that future researchers should undertake qualitative studies by employing in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions in multiple organizations. Since the fairness perception depended on several factors viz. personality, culture, expectations etc., therefore it is suggested that antecedents of OJ must be studied to understand the employee perception too. This study was based on self-reported data collected through four standardized questionnaires; hence it is suggested that scholars in future should customize their questionnaires to enable the peers, supervisors and even subordinates to respond on general justice scenario based on their observation and evidence. The study would then compare the result of self-reported data with other-reported data to bring about an objective assessment of the scenario. Finally, as there are limited studies in India on promotion of justice scenario in the organizations, this should well be another area of research for the scholars in future.

Conclusion

This study has produced clear learning that practicing organizational justice is indispensable for any organization to grow. It is therefore suggested that both the researchers and the practitioners (the managers) must be responsible to improve fairness in the organizations. They must adopt a joint approach and explore ways to marry the justice theory with practice in the organizations. Hence, we propose to conduct self-awareness training programs which would encourage the managers with low empathy to improve their sense of fairness and to pursue fair initiatives in the organization (Whiteside and Barclay, 2016). In addition, justice training programs should be undertaken to assist the managers walk the path of fairness in the organizations (Whiteside, 2015) as well.

The managements of both sectors must be proactive and take employee-friendly measures to create trust and confidence in the employees. This seems to be more crucial in the private sector. The private sector must introduce reforms to streamline its compensation structure. More so, it must avoid impersonal approach to work and pursue a humane standard. The study also provided the learning that the *years of service and qualification* factors had impact on their employee perception of OJ in the private sector. This indicated that expectations of qualified and long-serving employees were higher compared to others. Hence, the management must create a conducive atmosphere for such employees to fulfil their potential. The study also showed that there was a

sense of aloofness in the respondents of public sector. Their views were diverse and divided. Therefore, the public sector management must improve the communication channels in the organization facilitating better explanation of the policies, decisions and initiate hearing the employee concerns. The researchers and the managers should explore various measures maintaining a balance between employee welfare and organizational interest. All These recommendations, the researcher feels, would certainly contribute to improve justice scenario in the organizations.

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Conflict of interest

The author confirms that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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