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Application of Justice Theory to Address Social Issues: Introduction to the Special Issue

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The general theme of this special issue is not new—the importance of blending theory and practice in the social sciences is epitomized by Lewin's (1943) famous maxim, "there is nothing so practical as a good theory." Within psychology and management, many articles have been written about the scientist-practitioner gap, and there have long been calls for greater application of theory and research findings within organizations. We justice scholars also have called for greater application of research findings to the organizational setting, and indeed many studies have been undertaken to demonstrate the success of interventions derived from justice research findings within the workplace. For example, Greenberg (1990) showed that employee theft in response to a temporary pay cut (underpayment inequity) was mitigated when managers thoroughly and sensitively explained the basis for the pay cut.

Whereas the general theme is not new, we undertook the present project for two reasons. First, we thought it worthwhile at this moment to reflect on the organizational justice literature, its past, present, and future. With its conceptual roots in social psychology (e.g., Adams, 1965; Stouffer et al., 1949) and moral philosophy (e.g., Rawls, 1971), the field began to proliferate in the 1980s following the publication of several papers (e.g., Folger & Greenberg, 1985), including one by Greenberg (1987) which used the term "organizational justice" to refer to research that describes and explains the role of fairness in the workplace. In subsequent decades, scholarly activity on organizational justice proceeded along multiple fronts, which led to the following key insights:[1]

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1. Justice is multi-faceted. Employees appraise justice in reference to outcome distributions (e.g., "Is my pay equitable given my contributions?") and the processes associated with outcome distributions. Moreover, processes (and hence the use of the term "process fairness") refer to structural aspects of the decision-making procedures (e.g., "Are decisions made with accurate information?") as well as the interpersonal behavior of the parties responsible for planning and implementing decisions (e.g., "Were decisions explained adequately?" and "Was I treated respectfully?"). People also form more general, holistic impressions of the fairness of decision-makers and the organization without reference to specific events (e.g., "Does my organization treat employees fairly?").
2. Justice is consequential. Overwhelmingly, it has been shown to be positively related to employees' organizationally-relevant behaviors (e.g., work motivation and organizational citizenship behavior) and attitudes (e.g., organizational commitment and job satisfaction) as well as personally-relevant ones (e.g., well-being, work stress, emotions, and self-evaluations). Moreover, such findings have been observed in a wide array of organizational contexts (e.g., negotiations, performance evaluations, and larger-scale organizational change such as downsizings). Researchers also have delineated the conditions that moderate the influence of justice perceptions, such that justice perceptions have a greater impact when people are uncertain about themselves and/or their environments, and when they are on the receiving end of negative outcomes.
3. Employees care about being on the receiving end of high fairness in the workplace for multiple and not mutually exclusive reasons. High fairness has *instrumental value*, in that it gives people a sense of control over decisions and outcomes, increasing the perceived likelihood that they will attain desirable outcomes in the short and long term. High fairness has implications for people's *identity*, in that it communicates to recipients that they are valued members of the group, and it bolsters feelings of positive self-regard. High fairness helps people *manage uncertainty* about themselves and their environments, thus providing a sense of predictability and stability. Moreover, high fairness is an end in its own right, in that it affirms fundamental notions of morality.
4. Having demonstrated the essence and consequences of justice, scholars have focused on its *antecedents*, in studies examining factors affecting when employees exhibit, desire, and perceive justice. This paradigm examines justice as the dependent variable, in contrast to earlier work that examined the *consequences* of justice, in which justice was studied as the independent variable.

Given that much has been learned about the consequences and causes of organizational justice, we thought that the time was right to ask, what is next for the field? This brings us to the second reason for undertaking this project—the recent movement toward responsible management research (Tsui, 2022) which brings the issue of application to the fore. Responsible research is defined as the production of knowledge that is credible and relevant, "which informs policies and practices to create better business and a better world, both locally and globally" (Tsui, 2022, p. 6). We suggest that organizational justice scholarship is both credible and highly relevant, and therefore the time is right to use our evidence to promote organizational and social reform.

To this end, our goal in this special issue is to deepen conversations about how organizational

justice researchers can contribute to addressing pressing problems—including but not limited to those that reside within organizations. Not only do we believe that justice researchers *can* join the responsible research movement, but also that we *should*, especially in the face of world events that painfully illustrate the persistence of injustice in work organizations and in society.

Accordingly, we began by writing an article that illustrates our thinking in the context of three applied concerns (workplace diversity, equity, and inclusivity [DEI]; climate change; and political extremism; Brockner & Bobocel, 2024, this issue). We describe ways that justice theory and research can be brought to bear to help address each issue. Following these illustrations, we offer a discussion section which: (1) considers some of the barriers that might arise when putting justice theory and research into action, (2) makes recommendations for how to overcome these barriers, (3) speaks to the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice, and (4) describes ways in which organizational justice scholars can make their knowledge more accessible outside of academia.

Next, we invited prominent scholars to contribute with a relatively straightforward request: to use any significant aspect of our paper as their point of departure. We did not assign topics or approaches. Rather, in our quest to draw on contributors' deep knowledge, we asked them to contribute in whatever way they wished to push the conversation forward. Furthermore, to enrich the different approaches contributors may adopt, we invited two categories of scholars: those whose conceptual home resides within the justice literature, and those who have written about the conduct of responsible research more generally. We describe their papers briefly below.

Tom Tyler (2024, this issue) shares how theory and research in social psychology and organizational justice can inform the design of policing, a topic with far-reaching social significance. In particular, he shows how prior work gives rise to a model of policing in which people obey the law because they believe it is legitimate and that legal authorities are entitled to be obeyed. He demonstrates with research evidence how and why such a legitimacy-based model of policing is superior to the current model based on gaining compliance with threats or the use of force, which has dominated policing for decades but failed to deliver on controlling crime. He shows that legitimacy-based policing not only controls crime but also offers critical social, economic, and political benefits by increasing public engagement and community development. Tyler also discusses some of the obstacles that social psychology and organizational justice researchers will need to confront if we are to have a widespread impact on policy development within the legal realm.

Bob Bies and Laurie Barclay (2024, this issue) argue that "doing justice" involves a process that promotes healing by first acknowledging the deep pain that the experience of injustice has the potential to create within organizations and society. They draw on theory and research in the literature on trauma to offer a useful discussion of how people can transition from injustice to justice within the context of organizational and societal challenges. Too, they illustrate how justice has multiple roles in the transition process (as a motivating force, as a healing salve, and as a desired end state). Based on their analysis, they offer several interventions that can advance organizations and society toward a more just future, all while highlighting new areas of justice scholarship that focus on the human impact of injustice in organizations and society.

Deborah Rupp, Niti Pandey, and Dale Rothman (2024, this issue) argue that organizational justice scholars can have an impact on addressing pressing societal challenges by focusing our efforts at the level of policy development, rather than using justice research to develop "one-off" interventions more locally. Moreover, they highlight the need to work with scholars in other disciplines—as they

suggest, global social reform can only be tackled from a transdisciplinary perspective and with systems thinking. To do this, they argue that scholars must broaden current ways of conceptualizing justice away from a universalist (ideal) model and toward a liberal philosophy model, which recognizes the cultural and contextual values surrounding justice perceptions. They develop a consultative framework through which policy makers can screen various stages of policy making and audit progress toward goals. In this way, they argue that justice researchers can impact policy by "baking in" research on justice within a transdisciplinary approach to addressing major global challenges.

Finally, Gary Latham and Alex Alonso (2024, this issue) remind us that we can only put justice theory and findings into practice if the public is aware of what we have to offer. Accordingly, they offer concrete advice based on their own experience on how to transmit behavioral science findings to relevant parties outside academia who are in positions to apply our conceptual and empirical insights. For example, they highlight the importance of conducting rigorous field research, and share practical tips for how to get managerial buy-in; they challenge us to become "bilingual" with respect to communicating with the scientific community and the public, and they suggest ways to gain the attention of key stakeholders in the private and public sectors. Finally, they highlight the importance of forming alliances among institutions who share the goal of applying behavioral science findings (e.g., the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology and the Society for Human Resource Management).

Together, we believe that the articles in this special issue make a compelling case that organizational justice scholars may use our accumulated knowledge to promote reform that benefits individuals, groups, and the world at large. Each paper offers a unique and insightful perspective. Collectively, they also generate key insights, several of which we highlight here.

First, there are two ways that justice researchers can effect organizational and social reform. One is to begin with justice theory and research as the starting point, with the goal of using our knowledge to generate change. We and Tyler took this approach. Our paper highlights the ways in which justice research can inform three social and organizational issues (DEI, climate change, and political radicalization) as illustrations of our central argument. Tyler expands the terrain by showing how justice research and allied literatures can inform a different arena, that of policing. There are certainly other arenas to which justice research can apply. As noted earlier, the application of justice theory and research has long been of interest to organizational justice scholars. Arguably, however, the emphasis has been on the application of justice to solve organizational problems and improve organizational functioning (adopting an organization- or manager-centric perspective). Less attention has been given to applications that focus on employees and the human impact of justice and injustice within the organization (notable exceptions include Barclay & Skarlicki, 2009; Barclay & Saldanha, 2016). This special issue highlights the need to leverage our collective knowledge to address injustice in organizations from an employee-centric perspective as well.

A second approach to addressing pressing social problems is to begin with other bodies of knowledge as the starting point, with the goal of expanding our understanding of justice to produce new, socially relevant, knowledge. Bies and Barclay, and Rupp, Pandey, and Rothman took this approach. Bies and Barclay draw on the literature on trauma to shed new light on the experience of injustice. Although not all injustice may rise to the level of trauma, when it does, we can better understand the experience of being treated unfairly by considering the trauma perspective. Among other things, their analysis directs us to new research that focuses on the human impact of injustice within and outside of the organization; it also

suggests a need for research on what makes people experience injustice as trauma, which in turn can inform intervention. Similarly, Rupp, Pandey, and Rothman show us the potential for expanding the field's dominant conceptualization of justice by integrating it with the literature on liberal philosophy. By doing so, we can see how the current Rawlsian model of justice, which seeks to specify universalistic principles of justice, does not adequately capture the role that cultural values and context play in what individuals and communities experience as fair and unfair. Expanding our conception of justice is likely to be critical for affecting global social reform. It is also worth noting that, by incorporating knowledge from other literatures and other disciplines, organizational justice researchers may inform those bodies of knowledge in a reciprocal matter.

Responsible research involves the production of reliable and socially relevant research and its application. Thus, the two approaches represented by the present set of papers have the potential to contribute to social and organizational reform. Yet another insight from the set of papers pertains to the importance of establishing and nurturing relationships with others outside of our immediate academic circles. This point is brought home by Latham and Alonso with their reference to the need to be bilingual. To effect social and organizational reform, we organizational justice scholars must not only continue to speak to each other, but also broaden our reach to public and private sector stakeholders, institutions focused on the application of behavioral science evidence, and policy makers. Moreover, Latham and Alonso show us how this type of engagement may be achieved. The metaphor of bilingualism can be expanded to include becoming knowledgeable and conversant with other disciplines. By engaging with stakeholders, policy makers, and other disciplines, we can locate what we know within larger contexts. Interestingly, by engaging with other bodies and other disciplines, we also can learn how organizational justice scholarship is in fact presently being applied.

In the early 1990s, Jerry Greenberg wrote of the "intellectual adolescence" of the field of organizational justice (Greenberg, 1993). As he hoped would happen, we have expanded the field in critical directions such that three decades later, the field is in a stage of maturity. A risk at this point is that interest in the topic may wane. To forestall that possibility, we hope that the articles in this special issue invigorate interest and inspire action by illustrating ways in which we can help to address the injustice that persists in work organizations and beyond.

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Note

1. Whereas some have distinguished between the concepts of fairness and justice (e.g., Goldman & Cropanzano, 2015), fairness and justice also overlap to a considerable extent. As such, for the present purpose, we are using the terms interchangeably.

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