

Observer reactions to interpersonal injustice: The roles of perpetrator intent and victim perception

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Summary

The present research contributes to a growing literature on observer reactions to injustice experienced by others. In particular, we separated two variables that have previously been confounded in prior research, namely perpetrator intent to cause harm and victim perception of harm. We expected that injustice intent and injustice perceptions would have both unique and joint effects on observer reactions. The results of three experiments in which we manipulated perpetrator injustice intent and victim injustice perceptions supported our predictions. First, we found that observers had more negative reactions toward superiors who intended to inflict high versus low levels of interpersonal injustice toward a subordinate. Second, the injustice intent of the superior influenced observers' reactions more than did victim perceptions of injustice. Third, most novel, we found that the mere intent to cause injustice generated negative reactions in observers, even in the absence of a "true" victim—that is, when the subordinate perceptions of injustice were low. Together, our results emphasize the importance of examining observers' reactions to injustice and incorporating perpetrator intentions into the study of organizational justice. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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The rich subtlety of language allows flexibility in communicating with others, but that same flexibility can impede clarity and lead to misunderstandings. The possibility of misunderstanding or misinterpreting language, therefore, is present in virtually every type of social situation. In particular, organizations face this problem when supervisors give feedback to subordinates (e.g., Thornton, 2003). For example, imagine that you observed a supervisor making an ambiguous remark to a subordinate. You may know that the subordinate has interpreted the remark as praise but that the supervisor was actually being sarcastic and had intended the feedback as criticism. As a third-party observer to what was happening, you have a unique outlook on the situation. You have information about the supervisor's intent that the subordinate did not. You know how to interpret what was said, whereas the subordinate might not have understood the meaning of the remark and the intent behind it—perhaps assuming that it was clear-cut, not even taking into account that the remark could have more than one meaning (*meta-perceptions*, Laing, Phillipson, & Lee, 1966; Turner & Robinson, 2011). Our studies examine these types of situations to determine how third-parties react when they witness supervisors giving subordinates ambiguous feedback that could be intended and perceived in different ways.

Knowing intent can be crucial to interpreting ambiguous language, which in turn can determine the type of reaction someone has to various types of communications or behaviors. Evaluative phrases from supervisors with ambiguous intent can create situations in which observers and subordinates have different perceptions

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of the same remark. Thornton (2003), for example, has an entire book documenting commonplace ambiguous workplace communication that could lead someone to come away with a mistaken impression of the intent of the comment (e.g., “working with you is something I’ll always remember”; “you’ll be lucky to get this employee to work for you”). As in the aforementioned example, sometimes a third-party might know more than the subordinate does about a supervisor’s intent, and so the observer might react differently to the supervisor (e.g., with greater anger if the observer is aware that injustice was intended and that the subordinate was not informed about the actual intent). The nature of workplace interactions such as this one is uninvestigated—and that it has implications for organizational justice, in terms of both theory and research.

From a research perspective, our work addresses a possible limitation within the current organizational justice literature on third-party reactions, which confounds (i) the intent of the perpetrator (i.e., a supervisor) to be fair or unfair and (ii) the effect of the perpetrator’s treatment (i.e., perceptions of fairness or unfairness). Consider the main paradigm used in past organizational justice research on third-party reactions: The third-party knows that (i) one person or group (e.g., management) intended to treat another in a particular way (e.g., to lay off employees) and (ii) the intended effect was achieved (e.g., some employees were laid off). That paradigm confounds intent and its effect because the intent to be unjust is always paired with the effect or that injustice is perceived by a victim. This confounding makes it impossible to know which one was more responsible for the third-party’s reaction or if the combination of both produced reactions. By separating the perceived *effect* on the victim and the *intent* of the perpetrator of an action, we can address directly the relative importance of intent and effect on third-party reactions. As Skarlicki and Kulik (2005) noted, “third-parties can care about employee mistreatment for at least two reasons: (a) because of self-interest concerns [viz., regarding the subordinate’s outcome as an *effect* potentially relevant to the observer, perhaps vicariously], and (b) because mistreatment violates moral and social norms [i.e., those relevant to the supervisor’s *intent*]” (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005, p. 191). Our work assesses the independent and combined effects of both reasons, which has not been addressed before in the extant organizational justice literature on third-party reactions.

Our research strategy allows us to make four contributions to the organizational justice literature. First, our focus on the independent and joint influence of intention and effect makes it possible to examine the theoretical implications of deonance theory and research on empathy related to third-party reactions. Deonance theory proposes that people react negatively to unfair treatment because it violates a moral obligation to treat others in a fair manner (Folger, 2001). A perpetrator’s intent to engage in unfair treatment is a strong signal that the perpetrator is willing to violate a moral norm for fair treatment, and a willingness to violate moral norms can predict future violations. For these reasons, intent is viewed as a strong motivator for third-party reactions to injustice. Third-party responses may also be due to empathy or vicariously experiencing the feelings of another (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). In our studies, third-parties may experience an empathetic response based on the harm (i.e., the effect) perceived by the victim. Because we separate intent and effect, we capitalize on an ideal situation for coming to a better understanding of deontic and empathetic responses of third-parties.

Second, our work adds to the emergent justice literature on third-parties (e.g., Brockner, 1990; Brockner, DeWitt, Grover, & Reed, 1990; Brockner, Grover, Reed, DeWitt, & O’Malley, 1987; Kray & Lind, 2002; Lind, Kray, & Thompson, 1998; Tripp & Bies, 2009; for a review, see Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). The reaction of observers to others’ mistreatment is a latecomer to the organizational justice literature: “To date, theory and research on organizational justice has tended to focus on the victim’s (i.e., the employee’s) perspective; the third-party’s perspective has received relatively little systematic attention” (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005, p. 183). Interestingly enough, that statement continues to be descriptive up to the present, as evidenced by a 2009 comment that “research about observers’ or ‘third-party’ reactions to injustice has only recently emerged” (Hegtvedt, Johnson, Ganem, Waldron, & Brody, 2009, p. 22). In particular, the current research addresses a call from the literature for “three new foci for attention: A focus on the perpetrator, a focus on the victim, and a focus on the offensiveness of the act itself” (Turillo, Folger, LaVelle, Umphress, & Gee, 2002, p. 839). We consider more carefully the third of those, which is what has been the most overlooked so far, especially because it has been confounded with the other two (injustice perceived by the victim, injustice intended by the perpetrator). Our research adds to this literature and provides a fresh perspective on third-party justice reactions.

Third, our research strategy of focusing on the influence of intent and effect on third-party reactions is especially relevant to organizational justice theory. As Skarlicki and Kulik noted, “understanding the third-party’s viewpoint is important because it can inform current justice theory” (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005, p. 186). On the basis of deonance theory, we argue that intent is the clearest signal of a willingness to violate a moral rule. As such, we propose that intent will have a stronger influence on third-party reactions than will the effect of the behavior. With notable exceptions (e.g., Folger, 1998; Lerner, 1977; Montada, 1998, 2002), intent tends to be downplayed in relation to the effect of unfair treatment within the organizational justice literature. Thus, it appears that organizational justice literature could be neglecting a key (and sometimes principle) reason why observers react to unfairness. Our work could be a small step to help build future theoretical and empirical research examining the role of intent within the organizational justice literature.

Fourth, we further contribute to the literature on third-party reactions by focusing on reactions to a supervisor’s interpersonal injustice or treating subordinates without respect and dignity (Bies & Moag, 1986). We investigated this type of injustice because social or psychological harm resulting from interpersonal violations is deemed more unfair and severe than is material harm (Alicke, 1992; Leung, Chiu, & Au, 1993). Indeed, interpersonal justice violations are described as “hot and burning” experiences that potentially cause intense pain and damage to one’s sense of self (Bies, 2001). Furthermore, perceptions of high levels of interpersonal injustice are often interpreted as a violation of a moral duty as individuals expect to be treated as though they have value (Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2001; Folger & Skarlicki, 1999; Jones & Skarlicki, 2005). Thus, the personal nature of an interpersonal injustice offense, as well as the counterproductive outcomes associated with the perception of this injustice such as reduced productivity and lower levels of morale (Bies & Moag, 1986), appropriately lends itself to an investigation seeking to determine how observers respond to both intent and effect.

In the succeeding texts, we explore this new way to study justice reactions from the third-party’s point of view. We present the theoretical rationale supporting our predictions of the main effects and combined interaction of a supervisor’s intent and subordinate perceptions of interpersonal injustice. We argue that the influence of the supervisor’s intent can be conceptualized as a *deontic* main effect, whereas the influence of the subordinate’s perceptions can be conceptualized as an *empathetic* main effect. Then, we describe three studies in which we assess the role of deonance and vicarious reacting (empathy) as two explanations for third-party reactions. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and their implications for research on organizational justice.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

Traditional theoretical perspectives within the justice literature have used self-interest motivation as a primary theoretical explanation of reactions to injustice (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). A study of third-parties, or those not directly influenced by unfair treatment, allows us to examine situations that are less amenable to self-interest explanations. In particular, we are interested in situations that Skarlicki and Kulik noted in which third-parties have “no personal involvement with victims. . .which poses a challenge to justice formulations that presume all third-party concerns to be motivated by self-interest” (190). Skarlicki and Kulik suggest that Folger’s (2001) deontic justice provides a theoretical explanation to understand why third-parties react negatively to unfairness experienced by others, and we rely on this theoretical lens to develop our first prediction.

Deonance theory (e.g., Folger, 2001; Turillo et al., 2002), termed from the Greek word for duty, emphasizes that people *ought* to treat one another fairly because unfair treatment violates a socially affirmed moral rule (Folger, 2001; see Bies & Tripp, 2001, for moral reactions to injustice). This theory is relevant in that it can separate intention (*viz.*, what the supervisor wants to convey, as a compliment or as an insult) from effect (*viz.*, what the subordinate perceives as either a compliment or an insult). It deals explicitly with internalized “moral norms about social conduct” (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005, p. 190). In particular, “fairness is a moral standard for evaluating conduct;”

and thus, “people can be held accountable for the extent to which their *intentions* show a willingness to act in accord with such standards” (Turillo et al., 2002, p. 856, emphasis in original; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Folger, 2001).

Past research shows that people react negatively to someone who intends injustice (e.g., Aquino, Bies, & Tripp, 2001; Bies, Tripp, & Kramer, 1997; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999), but this work examined the victim’s perspective rather than a third-party’s and did not isolate the influence of intent from its effect. Here, we propose that intent alone is sufficient to generate negative reactions by a third-party. Consistent with deonance theory, intent to be unfair demonstrates a willingness to violate the moral rule to treat others in a fair manner, and such intent from a perpetrator will produce negative reactions from third-parties.

Hypothesis 1: Third-party observers will react more negatively when a perpetrator intends high rather than low interpersonal injustice.

We argue that third-parties will also react negatively to the effect of the perpetrator’s treatment, that is, whether injustice was perceived by the victim. Obviously, people prefer perceiving fair treatment and dislike perceiving unfair treatment when they are on the receiving end, but that does not explicitly address how third-parties feel about injustice received by other people. Studies of participants’ reactions to others’ treatment when they know they will subsequently be subject to such treatment themselves provide indirect evidence in the organizational justice literature.

Social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) suggests that individuals rely on information from others to shape interpretation of events. Fairness perceived by others could inform reactions to a supervisor, and previous research has supported this notion (Folger, Rosenfield, Grove, & Corkran, 1979; Jones & Skarlicki, 2005; Kray & Lind, 2002; Lind et al., 1998; Steil, 1983; Umphress, Labianca, Brass, Kass, & Scholten, 2003). Research has shown, for instance, that when a superior treats others with high rather than low levels of interpersonal injustice, peers who will be evaluated by that superior report lower levels of perceived justice (Jones & Skarlicki, 2005; Kray & Lind, 2002) and a higher willingness to retaliate against the superior (Jones & Skarlicki, 2005). Perceptions of justice from others, therefore, could serve to inform peers about the fair treatment from a supervisor. It is possible that knowledge of another’s unfair experience generates an empathetic reaction in which the third-party responds in the same way that the victim responds as a result of the vicarious experience of the event.

Empathy can be defined as “an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another’s emotional state or condition, and that is congruent with it” (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987, p. 91). Thus, empathy involves a vicarious response whereby people are affected by what happens to another person as if it were happening to them. Such an empathic response might “explain how a third-party’s justice concerns can be engaged for reasons that are not derived from his or her self-interest or relationship with the victim, symbolic or otherwise” (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005, p. 190). Our focus on third-parties who have no personal relationship with the victim allows us to examine the possible empathetic response to the unfair treatment of others. Our second hypothesis thus predicts an empathic effect.

Hypothesis 2: Third-party observers will react more negatively when a victim perceives high rather than low interpersonal injustice from a perpetrator.

We believe that a possible interaction should also be taken into account. Indeed, just such a possibility is exactly the reason why the design of our studies takes on the importance that it does, namely the importance associated with further clarifying how intent is central to deontic reactions. The potential for a value-added contribution from such studies is implicit in the way that various authors have pointed to the importance of studying third-party reactions and have indicated how important the deonance perspective is in that regard because of its key role in introducing an explanatory rationale other than self-interest:

[W]hereas myriad research has considered how individuals come to perceive whether or not *they themselves* are treated fairly, research on third-party reactions to injustice. . . considers how fairly individuals perceive *others* to be treated. These explorations take us. . . to a consideration of the moral and ethical underpinnings of justice-related decision making). . . [and to a consideration of] justice for justice’s sake, termed *deontic justice*. (Rupp & Bell, 2010, p. 89–90, emphasis in original).

Indeed, authors of the most recent theory about third-parties' reactions in the organizational justice context explicitly acknowledge using deonance as the basis for their own theorizing: "...based on the assumptions of the *deontic model* (Folger, 1998, 2001), our theory highlights how people who witness or learn about acts of injustice against others can be motivated to respond, regardless of the benefits such a response might bestow upon them" (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011, p. 527). Significantly, Skarlicki and Kulik's review noted that there are only "two general orientations to understanding their [third-parties'] justice motives: self-interest formulations and justice as a moral imperative [i.e., deonance]" (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005, p. 189).

Given that the deonance perspective has acquired this attention, and hence the value of examining the role of intention more carefully, the design of our studies allows us to test for an interaction that sheds light on deontic effects in a unique way. In fact, the importance of this test has a parallel with the importance that relational models of organizational justice placed on disentangling resource-benefit effects, or how people react on the basis of the amounts they are allocated (e.g., equitable outcomes), from procedural-feature effects, or how people react to various aspects of the allocation process (e.g., provision of voice). Finding ways to make sure that outcomes and procedures were not confounded made it possible to confirm that procedural features such as voice could influence reactions independently from outcomes. The most compelling data came from showing that a decision maker could get *positive* ratings from using fair procedures even from people who received *negative* outcomes (e.g., Greenberg & Folger, 1983). Our studies take the disentangling of influences a further step, and the test for an interaction gives us an opportunity to provide new, unique, and similarly compelling data about deontic reactions.

In particular, testing for an interaction provides key data about deontic reactions because it separates the *effect* of someone's action from that person's *intent*, which can show that differences in intent are *sufficient* to influence reactions toward an authority (a supervisor) and differences in effects are not *necessary*. The results can thereby show how third-party observers have sufficient reasons to give an authority *negative* ratings solely on the basis of the interpersonal injustice of the authority's intentions (a deontic reaction), even when the effects of the authority's actions on a subordinate are *positive*. Our studies created such a situation by having a third-party observer learn that a supervisor *intended* to *insult* a subordinate, but (in this case) the *effect* was that the subordinate instead felt *complimented*.

Deontic reactions occur when *negative* intentions (to insult; high intended interpersonal injustice) versus *positive* intentions (to compliment; low intended interpersonal injustice) make a significant difference in the reactions to the supervisor, such that those reactions become negative as a function of negative intent. A primary contribution to the relevant interaction comes from a uniquely deontic reaction in particular, namely that type of significant difference when there is *no* negative *effect* on the subordinate (viz., within *low perceived* interpersonal injustice: high versus low intended interpersonal injustice). If third-parties respond negatively strictly on the basis of the supervisor's ill willed negative intentions alone, when those intentions have no negative effect on the subordinate, then the presence of negative effects on the subordinate (feeling insulted) would be irrelevant—they would not add any information beyond what was already sufficient for negatively evaluating the supervisor because of interpersonally unjust intentions.

Taking into account the possibility of empathetic reactions, however, also brings in a more nuanced perspective: Although the negative effect of an insult might not increase the intensity of a third-party's reactions toward a supervisor any more than is already possible based on the injustice of the supervisor's intentions, the unconfounding of effect and intent (and hence, interaction tests from a factorial design) makes it possible to uncover an empathetic reaction in another way instead. Specifically, the empathy of a third-party for the negative *effect* on a subordinate who feels insulted might provide a *sufficient* basis for some negativity toward a supervisor despite a lack of ill will (low intended interpersonal injustice). To the extent that it happens because of empathy based on negative effects, differences in reactions based on differences in intent would be diminished (i.e., attenuated differences within *high perceived* interpersonal injustice between high versus low intended interpersonal injustice). Jointly, the effects we have described comprise the following interaction hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: A perpetrator's intent of interpersonal injustice interacts with a victim's perception of interpersonal injustice such that a perpetrator's intent will have a stronger negative effect on third-party observers' reactions when a victim perceives low rather than high levels of interpersonal injustice.

Moreover, this interaction parallels the way in which relational models of procedural justice theorized about the reactions of victims by emphasizing that although those reactions could be influenced by relational mechanisms (e.g., based on self-identity and self-esteem), such relational mechanisms did not represent the only basis for victims' reactions. Obviously, victims might also react negatively to negative outcomes. Thus, relational mechanisms were treated in a sufficient-not-necessary fashion, even if that language was not used.

We think the necessary-versus-sufficient distinction is vital to understanding third-party reactions, along with the intent-versus-effect distinction that our factorial design also brings to the foreground. In particular, other theorizing that draws on a deontic rationale has also noted that factors other than intentions can be important. Our focus on the morally motivated reasons for third-party responses does not preclude the possibility that some third-parties can and will react for instrumentally motivated reasons. There are many factors that might influence *why* and *how* a third-party will respond (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011, p. 527, emphasis in original). The present research, therefore, also helps pursue that neglected issue: Although harmful intent can be a *sufficient* instigator for negative reactions from third-parties (the deontic insight, highlighted by our intended insult, perceived compliment condition), that leaves its role as a *necessary* cause still an open question—precisely the question addressed by our intended compliment, perceived insult condition. In fact, the authors of the original deontic research had also noted exactly that same possibility, although only in passing: “we certainly would not be surprised to find. . . reactions varying as a function of empathy-based” considerations such as “caring. . . about what happened” (Turillo et al., 2002, p. 861). The extent of negative reactions in the intended compliment, perceived insult condition will show the extent to which negative intention is *not* necessary when empathy for a victim *is* sufficient.

On the basis of prior theory and research on the attribution of blame, it is reasonable to expect an empathetic response by observers to the harm perceived by victims even if no intent to cause harm is present. For example, Walster (1966) found that people were more inclined to blame a perpetrator for an unintended event (namely a car accident) when the results of the accident were more rather than less severe. Also, according to Jones's (1976) correspondent inference theory, perceivers use social role information to help them make inferences regarding a target's behavior. Thus, given their legitimate authority, we might expect superiors to be responsible for their communications with those who have less power, and who look to them for crucial information. In other words, we might believe that a supervisor has the responsibility not to, and should be careful enough not to, put subordinates in a position in which they feel disregarded, even if that is not the supervisor's actual intent.

Overview of Studies

In the succeeding texts, we report three studies that tested the preceding predictions. In each, we manipulated whether a perpetrator intended to inflict high or low interpersonal injustice via an ambiguous word or phrase and whether the victim perceived high or low interpersonal injustice. In Study 1, participants read a fictitious scenario describing an encounter between a superior (the perpetrator) and a subordinate (the victim). We designed Studies 2 and 3 to replicate and extend Study 1 by examining observers' reactions to what they believed was an ongoing encounter between a superior and a subordinate, as well to rule out several possible alternative explanations for the findings.

Study 1

Method

Participants

We recruited 131 sophomore students from an undergraduate business class at a large university in the southern U.S. Just over half the participants were women ($n = 73$); their average age was 20.62 years (standard deviation [SD] = 0.87).

We administered the experimental materials used in this study as part of a larger data collection effort. We counterbalanced our materials with a different set of experimental materials unrelated to this study such that participants were randomly assigned to receive our materials either first or second. We observed no order effects in the analyses; thus, our results are collapsed across order.

In all our studies, we told respondents that their participation was voluntary, their responses were confidential, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Also, we gave respondents extra credit in his or her business class in exchange for participation, and we debriefed them at the conclusion of the study.

Design and procedures

We used a 2 (perpetrator-injustice intent: high or low) \times 2 (victim-perceived injustice: high or low) factorial design. Participants read a vignette that required them to evaluate and interpret an exchange between a superior and a subordinate. The instructions informed participants that there were three individuals involved in the vignette: themselves as an observer, an employee (Bob), and Bob's superior (John).

In addition, we told participants that they would encounter the following symbols, *****, which would represent a word that has two meanings in the English language. The hypothetical word could mean either "horse's rear end" (and/or related equivalents) or "trusted colleague" (and/or related equivalents). After reading these instructions, the participants read the following vignette:

*You're a financial consultant visiting a client. While crunching the numbers, you overhear a conversation between a boss and his subordinate. John, the boss, said "Thanks *****!" as he quickly walked away from Bob, his subordinate. At first, you were not sure how Bob would react because, even though most people don't know it, ***** has two meanings.*

Independent variables. We manipulated victim-perceived injustice in the next portion of the vignette. In the high (low) perceived injustice condition, we told participants:

In this instance, however, Bob looked upset (pleased) because he felt sure that his boss was sarcastically (endearingly) calling him a horse's rear end [or equivalent insult] (trusted colleague [or equivalent compliment]).

We also manipulated perpetrator-injustice intent. In the high (low) perpetrator-injustice intent condition, participants read:

*Later that day, you heard John complaining about (praising) Bob while John was talking on the phone. John said, "Yes, I called him *****, and I wanted Bob to get the message that I view him as a worthless (valuable) member of my team."*

Dependent variable. Assessment of the dependent variable and manipulation checks followed the vignette. We asked participants to rate their anger toward the supervisor by responding to the following item, "John's actions made me angry" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Manipulation checks. We used two questions, presented after the manipulation and dependent variable, to assess the manipulations. We checked the manipulation of perpetrator-injustice intent with "John meant to insult Bob." We checked the manipulation of victim-perceived injustice with "Bob felt that John insulted him" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Results and discussion

Manipulation checks

A 2 \times 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that our manipulations were successful. Regarding the manipulation of the victim-perceived injustice, participants in the high perceived injustice condition ($M=5.67$, $SD=1.32$)

were more likely to agree that Bob felt that John insulted him than those in the low perceived injustice condition ($M=1.89$, $SD=1.37$), $F(1, 127)=262.83$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2=0.67$. For the manipulation of perpetrator-injustice intent, participants in high intended injustice condition ($M=6.06$, $SD=1.28$) were more likely to agree that John meant to insult Bob than those in low intended injustice condition ($M=2.12$, $SD=1.56$), $F(1, 127)=262.19$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2=0.67$. There were no significant interaction effects on the manipulation checks.

Test of hypotheses

We conducted a 2×2 ANOVA on the dependent variable (i.e., anger toward the superior) to test our predictions (see Table 1 for all means and standard deviations). The predicted main effect of perpetrator-injustice intent emerged, such that participants reported more anger toward the superior when perpetrator intent for injustice was high ($M=4.83$, $SD=1.44$) versus low ($M=2.49$, $SD=1.60$), $F(1, 127)=87.97$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2=0.41$. In addition, we found the predicted main effect of victim-perceived injustice such that participants reported more anger toward the superior when the victim perceived high ($M=4.05$, $SD=1.76$) versus low ($M=3.29$, $SD=2.01$) injustice, $F(1, 127)=9.59$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2=0.07$. The effect sizes (partial eta squared) for these two main effects suggest, as we proposed earlier, that perpetrator-injustice intent yielded a much stronger main effect than victim-perceived injustice. Finally, we found the predicted interaction between perpetrator-injustice intent and victim-perceived injustice, $F(1, 127)=8.86$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2=0.07$.

To further inspect the nature of the interaction, we computed the simple main effects of perpetrator-injustice intent within each level of victim-perceived injustice. The pattern of the interaction is reflected in Table 1. As we predicted, the effect of perpetrator-injustice intent was more pronounced in the victim-perceived low injustice condition, $F(1, 63)=95.11$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2=0.60$, than in the victim-perceived high injustice condition, $F(1, 64)=17.21$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2=0.21$. Inspection of the means revealed that participants reported the highest levels of anger toward the perpetrator when the superior intended high injustice, whether or not the victim perceived injustice (high perceived injustice: $M=4.85$, $SD=1.35$; low perceived injustice: $M=4.82$, $SD=1.55$). The lowest level of anger was reported when interpersonal injustice was not perceived and not intended ($M=1.72$, $SD=0.92$). The condition in which the victim perceived high injustice, but it was not intended, yielded a level of anger in between the other extremes ($M=3.24$, $SD=1.77$). Thus, the means correspond to our predicted interaction.

In summary, in support of Hypothesis 1, Study 1 revealed that third-party observers reacted negatively toward a perpetrator who intended high versus low interpersonal injustice. In support of Hypothesis 2, we also found that observers reacted more negatively toward perpetrators when the victim perceived high rather than low interpersonal injustice. Finally, Hypothesis 3 was confirmed, such that perpetrator-injustice intent and victim-perceived injustice jointly determined observers' anger toward the superior. Observers were equally angry at the perpetrator when he or

Table 1. Means, standard deviations (SD), and confidence intervals (CI) of anger toward the superior in Study 1.

Perpetrator-injustice intent	Victim-perceived injustice	
	High	Low
High		
<i>M</i>	4.85	4.82
<i>SD</i>	(1.35)	(1.55)
95% CI	4.35–5.34	4.32–5.31
<i>n</i>	33	33
Low		
<i>M</i>	3.24	1.72
<i>SD</i>	(1.77)	(0.92)
95% CI	2.75–3.74	1.22–2.22
<i>n</i>	33	32

she intended to be unfair, even when the victim did not perceive injustice. Thus, observers appear to be sensitive to fairness concerns when a perpetrator intends to commit an unjust act, even in the absence of a “true” victim.

It is plausible that observers may identify with the perpetrator or victim, even though they have no obvious reason for doing so. If participants identify with the perpetrator or victim, then their reactions might be influenced by self-oriented concerns for their in-group members (e.g., Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992; for a review, see Cropanzano & Rupp, 2002) rather than a concern for justice as a moral obligation or normative expectation as suggested by the deonance perspective (Folger, 1998; also see Lerner, 1977; Montada, 1998, 2002). We considered this possibility in the next study by adding identification with the victim and the perpetrator as control variables. In addition, although previous research indicates that single-item measures can be sound psychometrically (Gardner, Cummings, Dunham, & Pierce, 1998; Rohland, Kruse, & Rohrer, 2004), we wanted to replicate our result on our assessment of anger and extend the findings. Finally, we wished to test our hypotheses in response to actual versus hypothetical encounters; thus in Study 2, participants believed they were observing an ongoing encounter between a superior and subordinate.

Study 2

Method

Participants

We recruited 119 undergraduate students from an undergraduate business class at a large university in the southern U.S. Approximately half the participants were men ($n=60$), and their average age was 21.58 years ($SD=2.17$). Participants were all junior ($n=63$) or senior ($n=56$) students, and the majority of the sample (76 percent) was Caucasian. Approximately two-thirds of the participants were employed (65 percent) either full-time or part-time.

Design and procedure

We randomly assigned participants to one of four conditions in a 2 (perpetrator-injustice intent: high or low) \times 2 (victim-perceived injustice: high or low) factorial design. Upon arrival to the laboratory, we gave each participant a consent form and a questionnaire packet. We told participants that they would be assigned to one of the three different roles: a superior, a subordinate, or an observer. We then told participants that they had an equal chance of being selected to function in one of these roles. Unbeknownst to them, however, we assigned all participants to the role of the observer and pre-programmed the supervisor and subordinate roles. This allowed us to manipulate aspects of the encounter, as dictated by the study design.

Once in their role as observer, participants were told that they were to read and evaluate email messages going back and forth between the subordinate and the superior and that each observer would receive a different set of email messages to evaluate from a unique superior/subordinate dyad. We then told participants that the superior would ask the subordinate to edit a brochure about the proposed university health plan; the superior would manage and critique the subordinate’s work. The observer read two emails that were sent from the superior to the subordinate. The two parties also ostensibly shared information directly with the observer regarding their interactions with one another in two emails. In total, six emails were exchanged among the superior, subordinate, and the observer.

In one of the emails, the superior referred to the subordinate’s work as “one of a kind.” Pretests showed that this phrase was ambiguous and could be intended and perceived as high or low in interpersonal injustice (results available upon request). Each of the four experimental conditions shared the same communications except that perpetrator-injustice intent and victim-perceived injustice were manipulated relevant to the specific condition.

Independent variables. First, victim-perceived injustice was manipulated. In the high (low) injustice condition, participants read:

From: Subordinate

To: Observer

I just received an e-mail from my superior. When he referred to my work he said that it was one of a kind. I take this comment as an insult (compliment). I really worked hard on this assignment, but (and) it seems that my work was not (was) appreciated.

Next, we manipulated perpetrator-injustice intent by including information that the perpetrator intended the statement “one of a kind” to be high or low in interpersonal injustice. Specifically, in the high (low) perpetrator-injustice intent condition, participants read:

From: Superior

To: Observer

I have just received the work of my subordinate. I was disappointed (pleased) with the work they did on their editing task. In fact, they only (they) edited 15 of the 20 problems with the material. I am annoyed (happy) that they were assigned to be my subordinate. I would not (would) like to work with them in the future.

Assessments of the dependent variables, manipulation checks, and participant demographics followed the communication.

Dependent variables

Anger toward the superior. We used the anger measure from Study 1.

Punishment. We used three items to assess whether the participant felt that the superior should be punished for the way that he or she treated the subordinate: “To what extent would you like to take corrective action in response to the superior’s behavior,” “To what extent would you like to submit a negative comment in response to the superior’s behavior,” and “To what extent should the superior’s behavior be reprimanded by the experimenter?” (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*). We averaged items into a scale such that higher numbers indicated a greater desire to punish the superior ($\alpha = .87$).

Control variables

Identification with the superior. Two items assessed the extent to which participants identified with the superior: “I identified with the superior” and “I fit in with the superior” scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). We averaged items into a scale such that higher numbers indicated greater identification with the superior ($\alpha = .96$).

Identification with the subordinate. Two items assessed the extent to which participants identified with the subordinate: “I identified with the subordinate” and “I fit in with the subordinate” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). We averaged items into a scale such that higher values indicated higher levels of identification with the subordinate ($\alpha = .94$).

Manipulation checks. We used two questions to check the manipulations. We checked the manipulation of perpetrator-injustice intent with “The superior meant to insult the subordinate and his/her performance on the task.” We checked the manipulation of victim-perceived injustice with “The subordinate felt that the superior insulted him/her and his/her performance on the task” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). To further test our manipulations, we included four items assessing interpersonal injustice (modified from Tyler, 1994, and Wiesenfeld, Brockner, & Thibault, 2000): “The superior gave the subordinate feedback on the task in a respectful manner,” “The superior considered the subordinate’s feelings when giving feedback to the subordinate,” “The subordinate was treated with dignity and respect by the superior,” and “The superior was concerned about the subordinate’s fair treatment” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). We reversed these items and averaged to create an interpersonal injustice scale ($\alpha = .86$).

Results and discussion

Manipulation checks

A 2×2 ANOVA indicated our manipulations were successful. For the manipulation of victim-perceived injustice, those in the high perceived injustice condition ($M = 6.11$, $SD = 1.18$) were more likely to agree that the subordinate felt that the superior insulted him or her and his or her performance on the task than those in the low perceived injustice condition ($M = 1.74$, $SD = 1.39$), $F(1, 114) = 336.56$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.75$. For the manipulation of perpetrator-injustice intent, those in the high intended injustice condition ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.92$) were more likely to agree that the superior meant to insult the subordinate and his or her performance on the task than those in the low intended injustice condition ($M = 1.59$, $SD = 1.10$), $F(1, 114) = 25.99$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.18$. Further, we found significant main effects on the interpersonal injustice scale. For perpetrator-injustice intent, those in the high intended injustice condition ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.52$) were more likely to perceive interpersonal injustice than those in the low intended injustice condition ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.41$), $F(1, 114) = 16.31$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.13$. For victim-perceived injustice, those in the high perceived injustice condition ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.57$) were more likely to perceive interpersonal injustice than those in the low perceived injustice condition ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.40$), $F(1, 114) = 12.70$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.10$. There were no significant interaction effects on these manipulation checks.

Test of hypotheses

We conducted a 2×2 multivariate analysis of covariance on the two dependent variables (i.e., anger toward the superior and punishment) to test our predictions controlling for the participant's identification with the superior and the subordinate (see Table 2 for means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals for all cells).

For the control variables, we found that identification with the superior and subordinate significantly influenced both dependent variables at the multivariate and univariate levels (Table 3 reports the multivariate and univariate results for all variables). *Post hoc* analyses indicated that the more the participants identified with the superior, the lower their anger ($r = -.45$, $p \leq .01$) and punishment toward the perpetrator ($r = -.61$, $p \leq .01$); in contrast, the more the participants identified with the subordinate, the greater their anger ($r = .25$, $p \leq .01$) and punishment toward the perpetrator ($r = .25$, $p \leq .01$).

In terms of the primary results, first, we observed a main effect of perpetrator-injustice intent. Participants in the high injustice intent condition reported higher levels of anger toward the supervisor and endorsed more punishment (anger $M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.94$; punishment $M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.10$) than those in the low injustice intent condition (anger

Table 2. Means, standard deviations (SD), and confidence intervals (CI) of anger toward the superior and punishment in Study 2.

Perpetrator-injustice intent	Victim-perceived injustice			
	High		Low	
	Anger toward the superior	Punishment	Anger toward the superior	Punishment
High				
<i>M</i>	3.16	2.47	3.99	3.09
<i>SD</i>	(2.08)	(0.94)	(1.76)	(1.18)
95% CI	2.60–3.71	2.19–2.75	3.43–4.56	2.81–3.37
<i>n</i>	30	30	30	30
Low				
<i>M</i>	2.92	2.30	1.80	1.70 (.65)
<i>SD</i>	(1.53)	(0.90)	(1.24)	(1.40–1.99)
95% CI	2.31–3.52	1.99–2.60	1.22–2.39	31
<i>n</i>	28	28	31	

Note: Cell means were adjusted for the two controls: identification with the superior and identification with the subordinate.

Table 3. Multivariate and univariate results of anger toward the superior and punishment in Study 2.

Variables	Anger toward the superior			Punishment	
	Multivariate F	Univariate F	η^2	Univariate F	η^2
Identification with the superior	18.73***	9.66**	0.08	36.31***	0.24
Identification with the subordinate	6.78**	9.38**	0.08	8.74**	0.07
Victim-perceived injustice	0.14	0.52	0.00	0.01	0.00
Perpetrator-injustice intent	17.28***	16.96***	0.13	28.53***	0.20
Victim-perceived injustice \times Perpetrator-injustice intent	9.81***	10.12**	0.08	15.81***	0.12

* $p \leq .05$.** $p \leq .01$.*** $p \leq .001$.

$M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.41$; punishment $M = 2.00$, $SD = 0.80$). In contrast, we failed to find the predicted main effects of victim-perceived injustice.

Importantly, consistent with Study 1, we did observe the predicted interaction between perpetrator-injustice intent and victim-perceived injustice at both the multivariate and univariate levels. As in Study 1, we further inspected the nature of this interaction by computing the simple main effects of perpetrator-injustice intent when victims perceived high versus low injustice. Replicating Study 1, we found that the main effect of perpetrator-injustice intent was more pronounced when victims perceived low rather than high injustice for both dependent variables. For low victim-perceived injustice, anger $F(1, 57) = 27.12$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.32$; punishment $F(1, 57) = 32.31$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.36$. For high victim-perceived injustice, anger $F(1, 54) = 0.01$, $p > .10$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$; punishment $F(1, 54) = 0.11$, $p > .10$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$. The means reported in Table 2 illustrate the pattern of the interaction. As shown, observers expressed significantly more anger toward the perpetrator and endorsed more punishment when the perpetrator intended to treat the victim with high injustice but the victim mistakenly interpreted low injustice, compared with when the victim correctly interpreted the superior's remark as unjust.

In summary, Study 2 generally replicated Study 1 by using a different paradigm and after controlling for identification observers may have felt toward the superior and the subordinate. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, we found that third-party observers expressed more anger and had a stronger wish to punish perpetrators who intended to treat their victims with high versus low injustice. In contrast to Study 1, however, and inconsistent with Hypothesis 2, the main effect of victim-perceived injustice did not reach statistical significance. In hindsight, the null main effect for victim-perceived injustice may not be entirely surprising. We proposed that observers would consider a perpetrator's intent to inflict interpersonal injustice as a higher priority than a victim-perceived injustice. Although we did expect a significant main effect for victim-perceived injustice, the null main effect could illustrate the relative importance of the influence of perpetrator's intent when compared with a victim-perceived injustice on observer reactions. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, perpetrator-injustice intent and victim perceptions interacted to influence observers' anger toward the superior and recommended punishment. As in Study 1, observers exhibited the most negative reactions to perpetrators who intended high interpersonal injustice, even in the absence of a true victim (i.e., when injustice was not perceived). This finding is consistent with the idea that observers are especially offended when a victim unknowingly is treated unfairly by a superior with malicious intent.

Interestingly, we found that identification with the superior and subordinate significantly influenced our dependent variables. These findings suggest that even though participants were third-party observers, they perceived some connection with the superior and subordinate, and this identification helped form reactions to the superior. These significant effects could be due to the experimental setting in which participants were told that the superior and subordinate were students enrolled in the same university that they currently attended. Nonetheless, we found support for Hypotheses 1 and 3 after controlling for identification with the superior and the subordinate.

We conducted a third experiment to rule out alternative explanations for our findings in the first two studies. In Study 2, participants could have perceived that the superior was relatively inexperienced in their leadership role, given that participants believed that undergraduates like themselves were assigned to the superior role. Participants might have been more lenient in their reactions to these inexperienced leaders than superiors with more experience within organizations. Also, participants might have believed that the person in the role as superior was a classmate (currently or in the future), which might help explain the significant effect of identification with the superior and subordinate in Study 2. We addressed this concern in Study 3 by informing participants that the communications used in Study 2 were obtained from existing superiors and subordinates within a company located over 2000 miles away from their university.

Finally, in Study 2, we failed to present clear information regarding the subordinate's performance, which could have influenced our results for the perpetrator-injustice intent manipulation. Because performance information was absent, participants could justify the superior's intended high interpersonal injustice if they believed that this intent was generated from the subordinate's substandard performance. In Study 3, we provided clear information regarding the subordinate's performance, and we measured and controlled for participants' ratings of the subordinate's performance in the analyses.

Study 3

Method

Participants

We recruited 95 undergraduate students from an undergraduate business class at a large university in the southern U.S. Approximately two-thirds of the participants were women ($n = 63$); their average age was 24.04 years ($SD = 2.59$); and the majority of the respondents (85 percent) were Caucasian. Approximately half the participants were employed (47 percent). We gave each participant extra credit in his or her business class in exchange for participation. We debriefed respondents at the conclusion of the investigation.

Design and procedure

We conducted this study in the Internet. We randomly assigned participants to one of four experimental conditions. When participants logged onto the web page, they were told that top management at a Fortune 1000 company and a world leader in developing medical products located in Seattle had enlisted the current researchers to evaluate the communication between superiors and subordinates in their organization. We told participants that, because email is the most important method of communication in the organization, the researchers were asked to evaluate emails between superiors and subordinates. We further told them that superiors and subordinates in the organization were aware of the investigation and agreed to participate by forwarding the email communications that they sent to one another to the researchers. Further, ostensibly, we told superiors and subordinates that if they wished, they could send confidential email communications directly to the researchers, which would not be shared with the other party (i.e., their subordinate or superior). We asked each participant to evaluate one set of communications between one superior and one subordinate.

Again, Study 3 utilized a 2 (perpetrator-injustice intent: high or low) \times 2 (victim-perceived injustice: high or low) between-subjects design. The experimental manipulations were the same as those used in Study 2 with only minor changes due to the different setting of the organization (Seattle versus the students' university). In addition, in the current study, we explicitly informed participants how well the subordinate performed in the brochure-editing task. Specifically, in the last email communication from the superior to the participant, all participants read that the subordinate exhibited "average performance for this task." After participants read the email communications, we assessed our dependent variables, control variables, and manipulation checks.

Dependent variables

Emotion. To gauge participants' immediate emotional reactions to the email communications without asking participants to focus explicitly on the superior or the subordinate, we asked participants to rate the extent to which the following emotions described their "feelings NOW": "shocked," "appalled," "angry," "frustrated," and "content" (reverse coded) 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*). We created a composite score, such that higher scores reflect more negative emotion ($\alpha = .82$).

Anger toward the superior. We also assessed the anger toward the perpetrator as in Studies 1 and 2.

Punishment. We used the same three items presented in Study 2 to measure endorsement of punishment ($\alpha = .83$).

Control variables

Subordinate performance. As discussed earlier, we held subordinate performance constant, in that subordinates were said to be average performers. However, to control for the possibility that our manipulations influenced participants' subjective perceptions of performance, we included a 2-item measure of perceived performance: "The subordinate performed poorly" (reverse coded) and "The subordinate performed well" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). A composite ($\alpha = .88$) was created such that a higher score indicates higher perceived performance.

Identification with the superior. We used the same items to assess identification with the superior as in Study 2 ($\alpha = .93$).

Identification with the subordinate. We used the same items to assess identification with the subordinate as in Study 2 ($\alpha = .87$).

Manipulation checks. We used the same two items to assess the success of our manipulations of intent and perceptions, as well as the interpersonal injustice scale ($\alpha = .92$), as in Study 2.

Results and discussion

Manipulation checks

A 2×2 ANOVA indicated our manipulations were successful. As expected, those in the victim-perceived high injustice condition were more likely to agree ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.06$) that the subordinate felt the superior insulted him or her and his or her performance on the task than those in the victim-perceived low injustice condition ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.13$), $F(1, 90) = 67.79$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.43$. Similarly, those in the perpetrator-injustice intended high injustice condition were more likely to agree ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.21$) that the superior meant to insult the subordinate and his or her performance on the task than those in the low intended injustice condition ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 0.95$), $F(1, 90) = 17.86$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.17$. Finally, we found converging effects on the interpersonal injustice scale. For perpetrator-injustice intent, those in the high intended injustice condition ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.27$) were more likely to perceive interpersonal injustice than those in the low intended injustice condition ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.19$), $F(1, 91) = 29.18$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.24$. Also, as expected, participants were more likely to perceive injustice in the high victim-perceived injustice condition ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.35$) compared with participants in the low victim-perceived injustice condition ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.27$), $F(1, 91) = 14.00$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.13$. There were no significant interaction effects on any of the manipulation checks.

Test of hypotheses

We conducted a 2×2 multivariate analysis of covariance on the three dependent variables (i.e., emotion, anger toward the superior, punishment) to test our predictions, while controlling for participant's performance ratings

for the subordinate, and their identification with the superior and the subordinate (see Table 4 for means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals for all cells). In terms of the control variables, perceptions of the subordinate's performance, identification with the superior, and identification with the subordinate each significantly influenced some of the dependent variables at both the multivariate and univariate levels (see Table 5 for multivariate and univariate results for all variables). *Post hoc* analyses indicated that identification with the superior and ratings of the subordinate's performance were negatively related to anger toward the superior (identification with the superior $r = -.50$, $p \leq .01$; subordinate's performance $r = -.32$, $p \leq .01$), punishment (identification with the superior $r = -.65$, $p \leq .01$; subordinate's performance $r = -.48$, $p \leq .01$), and emotion (identification with the superior $r = -.35$, $p \leq .01$; subordinate's performance $r = -.39$, $p \leq .01$). Identification with the subordinate was not significantly related to the dependent variables.

Table 4. Means, standard deviations (SD), and confidence intervals (CI) of anger toward the superior, emotion, and punishment in Study 3.

Perpetrator-injustice intent	Victim-perceived injustice					
	High			Low		
	Anger toward the superior	Emotion	Punishment	Anger toward the superior	Emotion	Punishment
High						
<i>M</i>	3.83	2.42	2.59	4.90	2.85	2.99
<i>SD</i>	(1.59)	(0.74)	(0.82)	(1.22)	(0.80)	(0.65)
95% CI	3.26–4.41	2.11–2.73	2.31–2.86	4.23–5.59	2.49–3.22	2.67–3.31
<i>n</i>	26	26	26	18	18	18
Low						
<i>M</i>	3.31	2.22	2.70	2.74	2.04	2.19
<i>SD</i>	(1.41)	(0.69)	(0.81)	(1.38)	(0.72)	(0.88)
95% CI	2.74–3.88	1.91–2.53	2.43–2.98	2.12–3.37	1.70–2.38	1.89–2.49
<i>n</i>	27	27	27	24	24	24

Note: Cell means were adjusted for the three controls: subordinate performance, identification with the superior, and identification with the subordinate.

Table 5. Multivariate and univariate results of anger toward the superior, emotion, and punishment in Study 3.

Variables	Multivariate <i>F</i>	Emotion		Anger toward the superior		Punishment	
		Univariate <i>F</i>	η^2	Univariate <i>F</i>	η^2	Univariate <i>F</i>	η^2
Subordinate performance	2.79*	1.56	0.02	0.01	0.00	7.05**	0.07
Identification with the superior	10.24**	2.74	0.03	11.60***	0.25	29.67***	0.25
Identification with the subordinate	2.68*	0.01	0.00	1.62	0.02	6.49**	0.07
Victim-perceived injustice	0.61	0.52	0.01	0.61	0.01	0.14	0.01
Perpetrator-injustice intent	5.79***	7.18**	0.08	14.87***	0.15	4.31*	0.05
Victim-perceived injustice \times Perpetrator-injustice intent	4.77**	4.00*	0.04	8.49**	0.09	11.73***	0.12

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

*** $p \leq .001$.

In terms of the primary results, first, we found the predicted main effect of perpetrator-injustice intent at both the multivariate and univariate levels. When the perpetrator intended to be interpersonally unjust, participants reported more negative emotion ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.78$), more anger toward the superior ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.55$), and endorsed more punishment ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.78$) compared with when intent was low (M s = 2.13, 3.03, 2.45, respectively; SD s = 0.71, 1.40, 0.86, respectively). Consistent with Study 2, we failed to find a main effect of victim-perceived injustice.

Finally, replicating both Studies 1 and 2, we observed the predicted interaction between perpetrator-injustice intent and victim-perceived injustice. Simple main effects to examine the pattern of interaction revealed the same results as in the earlier studies. That is, the main effect of perpetrator-injustice intent was more pronounced when the victim-perceived low versus high injustice, and this was true for all three dependent variables. Within the victim-perceived low injustice conditions, emotion $F(1, 40) = 21.45$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.35$; anger toward the superior $F(1, 40) = 40.38$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.50$; punishment $F(1, 40) = 32.90$, $p \leq .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.45$. In contrast, within the victim-perceived high injustice conditions, emotion $F(1, 51) = 4.76$, $p \leq .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$; anger toward the superior $F(1, 51) = 6.34$, $p \leq .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.11$; punishment $F(1, 51) = 5.28$, $p \leq .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$. As shown in Table 4, participants reported more immediate negative emotions, were angrier at the perpetrator, and endorsed more punishment when the perpetrator intended to be unjust but the victim did not perceive injustice, as compared with when the victim correctly interpreted the superior's remark as unjust.

In summary, Study 3 replicated Study 2. Again supporting Hypothesis 1, we found that third-party observers experienced more immediate negative emotion, were angrier with the perpetrator, and endorsed greater punishment when the perpetrator intended to be interpersonally unjust rather than just. Our assessment of negative emotion captured respondents' first reactions to the encounter without specifying a target, whereas the measure of anger was explicitly directed toward the perpetrator. Observers thus had an immediate general negative reaction toward the encounter, in addition to responding more negatively when deliberating about the perpetrator's actions. The results again failed to support Hypothesis 2; there was no main effect of victim-perceived injustice. But similar to Studies 1 and 2, we observed the predicted interaction between intentions and perceptions. Once again, we found that observers reacted especially negatively to perpetrators who intended to be interpersonally unjust, even when the victim failed to perceive injustice. Thus, the data support the idea that observers are especially offended when unknowing victims are treated interpersonally unfair by a superior with malicious intent. Importantly, Study 3 further rules out possible alternative explanations for the findings, in that we controlled for variance that might be due to perceptions of the subordinate's performance, as well as to participants' identification with either the superior or the subordinate.

General Discussion

Our studies elucidate observer reactions to interpersonal injustice intended by perpetrators and experienced by victims. Previous research indicated that observers react negatively to perpetrators who intended to inflict interpersonal injustice (e.g., Turillo et al., 2002), but the research did not examine whether injustice was perceived by a victim. Other research has examined observer reactions to the interpersonal injustice perceived by victims (Jones & Skarlicki, 2005; Kray & Lind, 2002; Liao & Rupp, 2005), but it did not examine whether the perpetrator intended the interpersonal injustice that was perceived. Therefore, it is unclear from prior research whether observers reacted to the injustice being perceived by victims or to the injustice intended by perpetrators. Further, from previous research, one cannot discern the relative influence of perpetrator-injustice intent and victim-perceived injustice. We examined how third-parties react to a perpetrator's intent to inflict injustice and separated that from injustice perceived by a victim.

Four of our findings warrant discussion. First, across all three studies, we found a main effect of perpetrator intent to inflict interpersonal injustice. Specifically, observers reacted more negatively toward a supervisor who intended to inflict high rather than low levels of interpersonal injustice. Second, we did not find consistent support for the main effect of victim-perceived injustice. We predicted that observers would react more

negatively to situations in which a victim perceived high versus low levels of interpersonal injustice. This prediction was confirmed in Study 1 but not in Studies 2 and 3.

Third, we demonstrated the *relative importance* that observers place on perception and intent. Observers had stronger reactions to a perpetrator's intent to inflict interpersonal injustice than victim-perceived injustice across the three studies. Fourth, and perhaps most distinctive, we found that the mere intent to cause interpersonal injustice generated negative reactions, even in the absence of a "true" victim (i.e., when the victim felt complimented and thus perceived a low level of interpersonal injustice). In most cases, the most negative reactions from observers resulted when the superior intended high levels of interpersonal injustice but the subordinate perceived low levels of injustice. This finding underscores the importance of intention in assessing observer reactions to the interpersonal injustice inflicted and perceived by others. Even though no actual harm was perceived, observers reacted negatively to hurtful, inconsiderate intent.

Theoretical implications

As noted, previous research has confounded perpetrator intent and victim experience. Our research contributes to the organizational justice literature by (i) identifying this confound, (ii) attempting to address it empirically by separating the confounded variables, (iii) revealing novel findings as discussed earlier, and (iv) using our findings to draw conclusions that address specific theoretical models. In the succeeding texts, we concentrate our discussion comments on the theoretical contributions of our work, especially noting their implications for deonance theory.

The logic of deonance theory makes intentions central. The theory stipulates that because people hold moral norms of fairness in high regard (as well as other moral norms), the presence of its disregard arouses negative feelings toward the person or persons whose intentions imply such an attitude. Tests of deonance theory, therefore, call for an examination of the effects of someone's intentions on feelings toward that person (e.g., Turillo et al., 2002). In particular, if that person exhibits the intent to threaten someone else unfairly, that intent in and of itself can generate negative feelings toward that person. It follows that testing the effect of intention in and of itself requires not confounding injustice intentions with any given set of injustice consequences, which is what we have done here.

The extant organizational justice literature on third-parties has not comprehensively tested deonance logic because it has not separated intent from effect. Certain characteristic ways of thinking about third-parties and injustice actually seem to have made that deficiency a built-in tendency. The very definition of third-parties—"as individuals who gain information about an employee's(s) mistreatment by an organization or its agent(s)" (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005), for example, takes *mistreatment* (the *presence* of perceived *high* injustice) for granted. This focus on the existence of injustice transgressions means that any variation of intention has occurred only within one level (i.e., a high level) of perceived injustice; the variation of intention *without* a high level of actual injustice tends to remain unexamined by the very nature of the way the literature frames issues concerning third-parties. In contrast, we have argued (and the interaction across all three of our studies shows) that the *absence* of perceived high injustice—the conditions in which subordinates thought they had been complimented—reveals the *largest* degree of impact from variations in intention (i.e., supervisors who meant to insult rather than to compliment).

As a test of deonance theory, the Turillo et al. (2002) studies demonstrated the value of considering perpetrator intent in third-party reactions, but that research did not include a low injustice/high intent condition. The Turillo et al. deonance research thus failed to provide a comprehensive test of deonance logic because it lacked the conditions we incorporated into our design. Our research has followed up on that role of intention, however, and now serves as a much more thorough grounding for the logic of deonance. Moreover, our findings provide evidence directly relevant to the theory and supportive of it.

Our studies 2 and 3 did not obtain a significant effect of perceived injustice. This result suggests that an empathic response from third-parties is less likely to drive third-party reactions, at least with regard to outcomes focused on reactions toward the perpetrator. A third-party's awareness of a person's intent to hurt someone's feelings can be

a sufficient reason to dislike that person, for example, even if no hurt feelings result. Seeing someone have hurt feelings based on another person's comments, on the other hand, might not in and of itself (without evidence of intent) provide sufficient grounds for disliking the person who made the comments.

As a crude generalization, it follows that harmful *intentions* are *sufficient* to evoke negative reactions, whereas *harm* itself is *not a necessary* precursor, so harm plays a weaker role in third-party reactions. The absence of significant perceived injustice effects reflects one pattern that can result: Both of the high intended injustice conditions (whether high or low perceived injustice) produced substantial negative reactions relative to the condition of high perceived injustice and low intended injustice. As another indication of how intent outweighed consequences, the high intended/low perceived injustice condition created more negative reactions than the low intended/high perceived injustice condition.

Our results help highlight the *independent* effect of intent in ways not fully appreciated prior to now—in particular, drawing attention to the process whereby intent can act as a *moderator*. Organizational justice perceptions have been found to influence important employee, supervisor, job, and organizationally relevant outcomes (see Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001, as a review). Although these effects were discovered from the victim's point of view, similar effects have been found for observers (see Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005, as a review). It is possible that perpetrator intent could moderate these findings. We encourage future research to examine this possibility. To illustrate, consider Fairness Theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Folger, 2001) and its concepts of *would*, *could*, and *should* sequence of counterfactuals. Previous work has considered the victim's perceived treatment: "The third-party's judgment of the first counterfactual (*would* the victim have felt better if events have unfolded differently?) involves an evaluation of the (mis)treatment's negativity" (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005, p. 192). Our paradigm and the results it has produced suggest a qualification to the way in which that particular counterfactual applies, however, namely a sense in which the logic is reversed. In the intended insult/perceived compliment condition, the third-party's *would* counterfactual amounts to the thought that knowing the supervisor's true intent "would" have made things *worse* for the subordinate. The third-party is not angry as the result of being able to have a *better* state of affairs come to mind (the standard prediction for Fairness Theory). Unlike what Fairness Theory seems to imply, we do not always have to think about various possible kinds of results to make ethical judgments such as about fairness.

Such models as Fairness Theory can be adapted to start with intent-as-harm instead (e.g., perhaps as a different category of *would*), and we are not criticizing their conceptual insights (e.g., the theory explicitly recognizes that counterfactuals do not have to come in any particular order as stages and need not be sequential; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Rather, we want to highlight that our data show negative reactions from a third-party on the basis of negative intent (supervisor's comments intended as an insult) *without* "mistreatment" (perceived insult) *per se*. Some studies might fail to find a difference between mistreatment and no-mistreatment cases if intent were not taken into account (i.e., if the no-mistreatment case happened to involve *intended* injustice). This illustrates that intent might require a more pronounced role within the organizational justice literature than it currently occupies.

Applying the logic of deonance to the area of third-party research on organizational justice, therefore, has revealed new kinds of research questions to be addressed. In addition, our research has provided some preliminary answers to a set of those questions. We can illustrate the nature of these findings by noting how they call for further investigation of the effect of intentions in particular. The aggression literature gives examples that we think are especially apropos. For our intention-without-effect condition (high intended interpersonal injustice but low perceived interpersonal injustice), the parallel is the labeling of an assassin as very aggressive even when, say, a bullet does not find its mark. The existence of aggressive intent makes the behavior an act of aggression.

Our findings underscore the importance of intention in assessing observer reactions to the interpersonal injustice inflicted and perceived by others. Even though no actual harm was perceived, observers reacted negatively to malicious intent, possibly because it signaled a willingness to disregard the moral rule to treat others with respect (Folger, 1998; Lerner, 1977; Montada, 1998, 2002). It is also possible that especially strong feelings are generated when those who intend harm are seen as preying on unsuspecting victims, thereby leaving such perpetrators even more in a position to "get away with it" on future occasions.

Future directions and limitations

Several limitations of our research are evident. First, given our use of a laboratory setting to investigate the effects of perpetrator-injustice intent and victim-perceived injustice, one can question whether our findings would generalize outside of the laboratory. Although this is an open question, it may in fact be quite difficult to test the present hypotheses in a less controlled situation. To do so, one would need to capture a situation in which an observer had direct knowledge of the intent of a perpetrator and the victim's perceptions. In view of our interest in examining the unique and joint effects of perpetrator-injustice intent and victim-perceived injustice, we sought to maximize internal validity, recognizing the trade-off in terms of external validity.

Another issue that requires further investigation is the extent to which situations exist outside of the laboratory where a superior intends to inflict high levels of injustice, but the subordinate incorrectly perceives low levels of injustice. We think that this situation is present within the workplace, in particular when superiors fail to properly share developmental feedback with their subordinates. Subordinates who are unaware that their superior is unhappy with their performance could interpret a superior's sarcastic or paternalistic comment as praise. This can result from supervisors who select ambiguous language to express discontent because of their own discomfort with delivering negative feedback. Aside from anecdotal evidence, linguists have noted that compliments are sometimes expressed with harmful or negative intent and can be used to "express sarcasm, disapproval, to put someone down, to insult, to manipulate, and to threaten" (Wang & Tsai, 2003, p. 122). This suggests that a seemingly positive remark could be stated with malicious intent, which could create the situation in which a perpetrator intends to inflict injustice but the subordinate incorrectly perceives low levels of injustice. Although we think that this situation is experienced within the workplace, future research should examine the extent to which subordinates incorrectly perceive low levels of injustice from a superior's malicious comments.

Researchers may also wish investigate ambiguity, as it pertains to assessing a perpetrator's intent. If an observer was unsure of the perpetrator's intent, then the observer may speculate about his or her intent, possibly relying on victim-perceived injustice as a proxy for perpetrator intent. In a sense, we could also think of the victim's statement about his or her perception of unfairness as being an account (Bies, 1987)—that is, a social information-processing cue about unfairness that can influence the observer's perception of the perpetrator's unfairness. By the same token, we could think of the comments made by the perpetrator as cues that might influence the third-party's perceptions along the lines suggested by fairness heuristic theory (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002). Both possibilities could be interpreted in line with evidence such as that provided by Folger et al. (1979), who found a social confirmation effect: participants felt more unfairly treated when they learned that their fellow participants also perceived the experimenter treatment as unfair as compared with when they did not have knowledge of a coworker's opinion.

Further, the issue of ambiguity may be heightened in the context of cross-cultural interactions. It is possible that observers may be more unsure of perpetrator intentions if they and the perpetrator come from different cultures. In some cases, observers may be inclined to be lenient with perpetrators from another culture, giving them the benefit of the doubt in terms of a possible malicious intent. However, this may also heighten the observer's use of victim perceptions of harm to judge perpetrator intent. Future research should investigate these and other questions concerning how observers "sense make" about fairness when faced with ambiguous information. Such research could be especially important in the context of work on meta-perceptions in the workplace (Laing et al., 1966; Turner & Robinson, 2011).

Additionally, perhaps as a result of the artificial setting, observers did not report particularly strong reactions, as indicated by the generally moderate magnitude of the means. Yet, we are encouraged by the strength of our effects because of our focus on observers. Finally, we focused on observer reactions to interpersonal injustice in the present studies. Whereas we have no reason to think that our findings would not generalize to other forms of injustice, future research is necessary to examine this assumption.

Despite these limitations, we hope that our research will inform and stimulate future work. As suggested earlier, for example, future research could focus on observers' willingness to help victims or to express empathy when injustice is observed. Previous research indicates that when observers perceive injustice, they are motivated to restore the injustice because of the need to believe in a just world (Lerner, 1965, 1980). However, it is unclear whether

observers would act to restore injustice when victims do not believe that they were harmed, yet harm was intended by perpetrators. A focus on observer reactions toward victims rather than toward perpetrators can answer this and other research questions (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005).

Practical implications

Our results potentially have important implications for the value of justice within organizations. Previous work indicates that injustice perceived by the self (see Colquitt et al., 2001 for a review) or coworkers (e.g., Colquitt, 2004; Lind et al., 1998; Skarlicki, Ellard, & Kelln, 1998) influences important attitudes and behaviors within organizations. Our findings add to this work and to a growing body of research into the reactions of third-parties. Research on observer reactions suggests that whether organizational leaders treat employees justly or unjustly has implications not only for those particular employees but also for observers both inside and outside of the organization. For instance, potential customers or clients who learn that someone was treated unfairly within an organization may choose not to patronize that organization because of the injustice. Indeed, in Studies 2 and 3, we found that observers wished to punish perpetrators who harmed or who intended to harm their victims (regardless of victim perceptions); one form of punishment could be protesting or withdrawing resources from an organization. As a result, managers should realize that when they intend to treat their employees unfairly, even if their employees may not perceive it as unfair treatment, third-party observers such as the general public may notice their malicious intent and have negative reactions (e.g., criticizing the company, not doing business with them, or not applying for jobs).

In addition, other factors inside the organization could be impacted. For example, organizations sometimes conduct questionnaires that survey their employees to identify individuals who have been victimized by policies or procedures that have been breached. The questions are generally worded in a fashion that ask employees if they have been personally harmed by a violated guideline (i.e., treat every individual with dignity) as opposed to asking if they have observed someone being treated with disrespect or rudeness (i.e., interpersonal unfairness). Our research suggests that organizations should be made aware that the influence of perceptions of unfairness extends beyond the perception of a "true victim." In fact, our findings suggest that even though there may be no "true victims" (i.e., the victim perceived no harm), observers (i.e., a co-worker) may have a desire to retaliate if they perceive that a perpetrator intended wrongdoing. Thus, it would be vital to consider observers as well as victims and perpetrators to assess and manage circumstances that might include perceptions of interpersonal injustice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, whereas past research that focuses on *recipients'* reactions to injustice has revealed important knowledge, comparatively less is known about the reactions of observers to the injustice experienced by others. The present research expands our knowledge of justice processes by investigating the relative influence of perpetrator-injustice intent and victim-perceived injustice, and their combination, on the reactions of observers. Our findings suggest that observers incorporate both types of information in their reactions, although they are particularly influenced by perpetrator intent. In short, observers react negatively to perpetrators who intend injustice even when no injustice is perceived.

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