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CHAPTER

24

A Positive Lens on Organizational Justice

Toward a Moral, Constructive, and Balanced Approach to Reactions to Third-party (In)justice

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Abstract

Although there is a sizeable literature on one's own reactions to (in)justice, less is known about third-party reactions to other's (in)justice. The research that does exist tends to focus on self-interested explanations for caring about other's (in)justice, generally examines negative responses such as retaliation, punishment, and withdrawal, and typically does not distinguish between injustice and justice. In this chapter, I briefly review the literature on third-party reactions to (in)justice, highlight how this literature could benefit from a positive approach, present a theoretical model linking other's justice and injustice to moral emotions and ultimately to constructive and prosocial responses, and conclude with several practical and research implications.

Keywords: Organizational justice, positive organizational scholarship, third-party reactions, morality

A sizable literature examines reactions to experiences and perceptions of (in)justice in the workplace, a field that has come to be known as *organizational justice* (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005). Empirical research on organization justice reveals that justice perceptions have important attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, such as organizational commitment, evaluations of authority, job satisfaction, trust, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), deviance, and performance (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). A defining feature of most of the research on organizational justice is the examination of how an individual responds to his or her own experiences and/or perceptions of (in)justice. Clearly, when an individual experiences and/or perceives unjust treatment, negative outcomes ensue.

An alternative approach in the organizational justice literature is to examine third-party reactions to others' (in)justice. Beginning with the pioneering work by Brockner and colleagues (Brockner, 1990; Brockner, DeWitt, Grover, & Reed, 1990; Brockner, Greenberg, Brockner, Bortz, Davy, & Carter, 1986; Brockner, Grover, Reed, DeWitt, & O'Mally, 1987; Brockner, Tyler, & Cooper-Schneider, 1992) in the mid-1980s and early 1990s demonstrating how "survivors" of layoffs were heavily influenced by the way those who were "let go" were treated, this area of research has gained considerable momentum in recent years (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). This burgeoning area of inquiry provides an interesting complement to the extant organizational justice literature by acknowledging that people care not only about their own treatment but also about how others are treated. Skarlicki and Kulik provide an excellent review of this literature and highlight how several fields (e.g., organizational behavior, social psychology, law, etc.) have contributed to understanding the conditions under which others' (in)justice is associated with third-party reactions, the underlying mechanisms responsible for these reactions, and the aftermath of third-party behavior.

Although this domain of research shows much promise, a perusal of the literature reveals a certain irony: The literature on third-party reactions, a seemingly positive notion, has taken a decidedly

negative tone. Consistent with a positive organizational scholarship (POS) orientation (Cameron, 2007; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Caza & Cameron, 2008; Spreitzer, 2008), I believe a positive approach to the study of third-party reactions to others' (in)justice could greatly contribute to the field of organizational justice. Specifically, I argue that there are three primary ways to study third-party (in)justice through a positive lens—and that research has typically not taken such an approach. First, many of the explanations provided for why people care about others' (in)justice are self-interested in nature (see Folger, 1994, 1998, 2001, for exceptions). Although Skarlicki and Kulik (2005) emphasize that moral explanations can be used to understand third-party reactions, the reality is that scholars have typically drawn on self-interested rationales for why an individual in the workplace may care about another's treatment (see O'Reilly & Aquino, in press for a notable exception). Second, scholars have typically studied "negative" reactions to other's mistreatment, such as blaming the victim, punishing the victim, punishing the perpetrator, and withdrawing from the organization (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). However, individuals can also respond with compassion to victims, with constructive conversations with perpetrators, and with prosocial behavior. Third, research on third-party reactions has tended to not differentiate between *injustice* and *just* treatment. Given that scholars are increasingly aware that positive and negative, good and bad, and just and unjust may represent different constructs, as opposed to ends of the same continuum (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), a positive approach to third-party reactions considers not only reactions to injustice but also to justice.

In an effort to introduce a positive lens on third-party reactions to other's (in)justice, I contend that there are three defining features of this positive approach: using a *moral* explanation to explain third-party reactions; emphasizing compassionate, *constructive*, and prosocial reactions; and providing a more *balanced* approach by exploring reactions to both injustice and justice. To be clear, the focus of this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive review of the literature on reactions to third-party (in)justice (see Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005 for a review), but rather to explicate what a positive lens on third-party reactions to (in)justice might look like. In what follows, I briefly highlight the typical self-interest paradigm in third-party reaction research and then describe how a moral lens represents a more positive approach. Next, I review the various negative outcomes associated with third-party reactions and make the case for considering constructive and prosocial reactions. Then, I suggest that justice and injustice are not separate ends of the same continuum, and assert that a positive lens is more balanced and thus focuses on reactions to justice and injustice. Finally, I present a theoretical model linking other's treatment (i.e., justice and injustice) to positive outcomes (i.e., compassion, constructive responses, prosocial behavior) through moral emotions (i.e., righteous anger, empathy, gratitude, elevation).

A Positive Lens on Third-party Reactions to (In)justice

Moral Explanations

The first hallmark of a positive lens on third-party reactions to other's (in)justice concerns the underlying motivation for the reaction. Specifically, I argue that a moral lens is a critical component of a positive approach. However, the preponderance of research on organizational justice more generally, and third-party reactions more specifically, has taken a self-interested lens.

As noted in reviews of the justice literature (see Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001; Cropanzano, Rupp, Mohler, & Schminke, M. 2001; Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005), there are several motivations for why people care about justice. These motives have traditionally focused on several self-interested explanations, such as a desire for economic gain (Thibaut & Walker, 1975), a need to feel a connection to and sense of belongingness with others (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992), and a goal of reducing uncertainty (Lind, 2001; Lind & van den Bos; 2002; van den Bos & Lind, 2002). These same motives have been applied to the literature on third-party reactions to (in)justice (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). For example, when formulating predictions about why a third party might be affected by (in)justice, scholars have highlighted the role of these self-interested explanations (Colquitt, 2004; De Cremer, Stinglhamber, & Eisenberger, 2005; De Cremer, Van Dijke, & Mayer, 2010; De Cremer & Van Hiel, 2006, 2010; De Cremer, Wubben, & Brebels, 2008; Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006; Jones & Skarlicki, 2005; Lind, Kray, & Thompson, 1998; Mayer, Nishii, Schneider, & Goldstein, 2007; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; van den Bos & Lind, 2001).

An alternative (and I argue more positive) way to think about third-party reactions is to take a moral lens. A moral lens suggests that people respond to

third-party reactions not because the mistreatment of a third party has implications for one's own well-being, but rather because the third party believes his reaction is the right thing to do. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that one motivation for why individuals care about other's treatment is because they believe that people deserve to be treated with respect and justice. Folger's (1994, 1998, 2001) deontic model highlights this fundamental belief about how people should be treated. In essence, the deontic model argues that people care about justice because it is simply "the right thing to do"—as opposed to a self-interested reason for wanting to see other's treated fairly.

Although scholars have typically focused on self-interested explanations for third-party reactions, some research has taken a moral lens. For example, some research in behavioral economics suggests that individuals will enforce justice rules even when it hurts their own economic self-interest (Johansson & Svedsater, 2009; Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1986; Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress, & Gee, 2002). In addition, recent work by Rupp and colleagues (Liao & Rupp, 2005; Rupp & Bell, 2010; Skarlicki & Rupp, in press; Spencer & Rupp, 2009) draws on the deontic model and provides support for the notion that individuals care about other's treatment for moral reasons. This work, which takes a moral approach to understand third-party reactions, is a positive way to think about such behavior.

Constructive Reactions

A second characteristic of a positive lens on third-party reactions to other's (in)justice concerns the nature of the reaction. Specifically, I maintain that considering constructive reactions to others' injustice is a key aspect of a positive approach. Interestingly, the bulk of the research on third-party reactions has focused on negative reactions. For example, research has demonstrated how other's (in)justice can have negative implications for task performance, conflict, cooperation, citizenship, emotions, depression, anti-social behavior, turnover intentions, job satisfaction, commitment, and trust (Colquitt, 2004; De Cremer et al., 2005; De Cremer et al., 2010; De Cremer & Van Hiel, 2006, 2010; De Cremer et al., 2008; Duffy et al., 2006; Jones & Skarlicki, 2005; Liao & Rupp, 2005; Lind et al., 1998; Mayer et al., 2007; Rupp & Bell, 2010; Skarlicki & Rupp, in press; Spencer & Rupp, 2009; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; van den Bos & Lind, 2001). In general, the only time other's treatment has a positive influence on behaviors, attitudes, and emotions is when the other person has been treated worse than the focal employee. Consistent with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), research generally shows, in that situation, that the outcomes are more favorable. Even when employees act out of moral concerns as opposed to their own self-interest, individuals tend to respond to other's injustice with undesirable outcomes such as retaliation, punishment, reducing commitment and identification with the transgressor or institution, abstaining from action, or increased perceptions of emotional labor (Kahneman et al., 1986; Liao & Rupp, 2005; Skarlicki & Rupp, in press; Spencer & Rupp, 2009; Turillo et al., 2002).

Although these findings are interesting because they highlight that individuals do respond to other's justice, and the motivation appears to reside in moral rather than self-interested explanations in some cases, I would not characterize the majority of outcomes as positive. Positive, or constructive, reactions can take many forms. In terms of reactions to *injustice*, one example is to provide emotional support and compassion to an individual who was victimized by mistreatment. This behavior could take the form of listening, empathizing, helping direct the individual to a course of action, or any number of other supportive behaviors. Another positive response is to directly address the perpetrator. This behavior could entail talking to the wrongdoer, sticking up for the victim, and constructively trying to come up with a conclusion to aid the victim.

In terms of reactions to other's justice, an individual could respond by expressing gratitude to the authority figure who provided the fair treatment on the beneficiary's behalf. In addition, one could "pay it forward" by treating others in his or her social world in a similarly fair manner. Alternatively, he or she could respond by engaging in prosocial behaviors that help the authority figure and/or his or her organization. Indeed, work on virtuousness (Bright, Cameron, & Caza, 2006; Cameron, 2003a,b; Cameron Bright, & Caza, 2004; Caza, Barker, & Cameron, 2004) highlights the amplifying effects of positive emotions—and such emotions are likely to occur when others are treated fairly. Consistent with Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, the amplifying effects of positive emotions in the form of virtuousness tends to be self-perpetuating. Thus, when a third party sees another person treated in a just manner, it can lead to positive emotions that lead to prosocial and virtuous behavior. I return to these positive reactions when presenting the theoretical model later in this chapter.

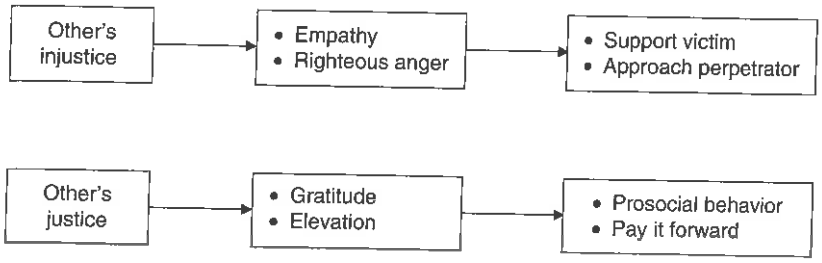

Fig. 24.1 A theoretical model of positive reactions to third-party (in)justice.

Justice and Injustice

A third component of a positive lens on third-party reactions to other's treatment concerns the inclusion of both just and unjust treatment. Specifically, I contend that exploring reactions to both other's injustice and other's just treatment is a critical way to take a positive approach. However, the majority of work on third-party reactions has not differentiated between justice and injustice but has implicitly focused on injustice. For example, Skarlicki and Kulik (2005) use the word "(mis)treatment" in the title of their review of the third-party literature and focus primarily on research in which another individual has been mistreated.

The issue of whether justice and injustice are distinct constructs or ends of the same continuum will likely become an emerging topic in the organizational justice literature. As an example, being treated with injustice could include being sexually harassed by one's boss—a clear violation of appropriate interpersonal treatment and a lack of dignity and respect. In contrast, being treated justly could involve a supervisor who goes out of his or her way to make an employee feel like a valued member of the work group and takes a genuine interest in his or her personal and professional development. I argue that justice and injustice are qualitatively different, and that many of the effects that have been found in the justice literature are a result of injustice as opposed to justice. Indeed, research on positive–negative asymmetry demonstrates that "bad is stronger than good" (Baumeister et al., 2001). However, our manipulations and measurement of (in)justice generally do not allow us to tease apart the role of injustice and justice. I argue that it is important to think about justice and injustice as distinct constructs and to explore reactions to both because reactions to each could differ.

Summary

I sought to make the case that the literature on reactions to third-party (in)justice tends to have a negative orientation. I argue for three amendments to the third-party literature in order to introduce a positive lens: a focus on the moral motivation of the action, an examination of constructive outcomes, and the presentation of a balanced approach by considering both unjust and just dynamics. In what follows, I draw on these three principles to develop a theoretical model taking a positive approach to third-party reactions to (in)justice.

Theoretical Model

This section presents a theoretical model that uses a positive lens to study third-party reactions (see Figure 24.1). As an overview, I present two separate pathways, one for justice and one for injustice, that lead to constructive reactions through the mechanisms of moral emotions. The focus on emotions is notable as most theories used to explain third-party reactions have been more cognitive in nature (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005).

Pathway 1: Other's Injustice

The first pathway in the model begins with other's injustice. Other's injustice can take many forms. For example, consistent with the different justice dimensions (Colquitt, 2001), injustice can be about distributions, procedures, or interpersonal interactions. A distributive injustice could occur when an outcome an individual receives is unfair. For example, a person who should certainly be promoted to a higher-level position is not. A procedural injustice could occur when the procedures used to make a decision are unfair. An example might be suspending an employee for alleged wrongdoing and not allowing him to voice his side of the story first. An interactional injustice could occur when a person is not treated with dignity or respect, or provided an adequate explanation for a decision. An example would be if a coworker or supervisor belittles, makes fun of, and/or sexually harasses another employee or subordinate. These are just a few of the examples that could constitute injustice.

In response to these types of injustices, employees are likely to have emotional reactions (De Cremer, 2007). Specifically, I focus on two other-focused moral emotions: righteous anger and empathy (Tangney et al., 2007). *Righteous anger* occurs as a result of a perpetrator who violates moral standards. As Tangney et al. (p. 361) note, "In such cases, the harm need not be personally experienced. One can feel anger upon witnessing morally repulsive behavior aimed at a third party . . . Righteous anger can serve moral functions in that it can motivate 'third-party' bystanders to take action in order to remedy injustices." Indeed, when an employee witnesses the injustice of another organizational member it can lead to feelings of righteous anger as a widely held moral principle is breached.

Empathy is defined as a "shared emotional response between an observer and a stimulus person" (Feshbach, 1975, p. 25). Thus, empathy is generally conceived of as a moral emotional *process* as opposed to a discrete emotion (Eisenberg, Valiente, & Champion, 2004; Tangney et al., 2007). Other-oriented empathy involves not only taking another's perspective but also vicariously feeling the same emotions. An empathic response involves a focus on the person in need as opposed to one's own response to the situation. When someone is the victim of an injustice, it is likely that others will feel empathy toward that person because she is in a stressful and difficult situation. Empathy is closely related to compassion, which involves a consideration and concern about others' pain (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Kanov, Maitlis, Worline, Dutton, Frost, & Lilius, 2004; Lilius, Worline, Maitlis, Kanov, Dutton, & Frost, 2008).

The model posits that these two emotions, righteous anger and empathy, will be associated with constructive behaviors. The constructive behaviors I focus on relate to interactions with the victim (e.g., showing compassion, talking through the issue, helping develop a plan for moving forward) and interactions with the perpetrator (e.g., having a direct, honest, but nonconfrontative conversation with the perpetrator). There is reason to believe that these two emotions will lead to constructive reactions. For example, righteous anger is associated with having concern for and a desire to help distressed others (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). Similarly, research demonstrates that empathy promotes helping others in need (Batson, 1991) and inhibits aggressive responses that harm others (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). Thus, righteous anger and empathy that result from another person's experienced injustice are expected to lead to constructive responses that benefit the victim.

Pathway 2: Other's Justice

The second pathway in the model begins with other's justice. In line with injustice taking multiple forms, such as distributive, procedural, and interactional, so too can justice. For example, an employee who has performed well can be appropriately rewarded for his or her work even when the boss feels pressure from higher-ups to not provide bonuses (i.e., distributive justice). Alternatively, the boss is never biased and always tries to be ethical when making tough decisions, even when others in the organization may use less transparent and more deceptive means (i.e., procedural justice). Finally, one's manager may go to great lengths to find out about each of his employees and therefore demonstrate the respect he has for his whole team, even when he is very busy (i.e., interactional justice). Clearly, there are several behaviors that one could engage in to be considered as fair.

In response to these types of just treatment, I posit that employees are likely to experience two positive other-focused moral emotions: gratitude and elevation (Tangney et al., 2007). *Gratitude* is "a feeling of thankfulness directed toward others that emerges through social exchanges between helpers and beneficiaries" (Grant & Gino, 2010, p. 946–947). Although gratitude is typically examined as a result of one's own positive experiences with another, it can also occur in a third party who witnesses another being fairly treated.

Elevation is a positive moral emotion that occurs when observing another who is virtuous or commendable (Haidt, 2000). This emotion is often accompanied by a warm, pleasant feeling in one's chest. Elevation helps to develop a "broaden-and-build" (Frederickson, 2000) approach to the world. Feeling a sense of awe by watching a manager treat others fairly even when it is not easy to do so can promote the emotion of elevation.

Consistent with the model, I predict that these two positive, other-focused moral emotions eventuate in prosocial behavior. There is considerable theoretical and empirical support for the link between these emotions and prosocial behavior. For example, research supports the notion that gratitude promotes prosocial acts (see McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001 for a review). Gratitude can serve as a moral reinforcer that promotes helpful behavior. Similarly, elevation is associated with being prosocial (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Landis,

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Sherman, Piedmont, Kirkhart, Rapp, & Bike, in press; Schnall, Roper, & Fessler, 2010). Thus, I suggest that feelings of gratitude and elevation that result from observing other's justice promote prosocial behavior not only toward the person who spurred the emotion, but also can spread to others in one's social world in a "pay it forward" sense.

Summary

In this model, I posit that injustice and justice are important and drive constructive and prosocial third-party reactions. These relationships are explained by the activation of moral emotions—righteous anger and empathy for other's injustice, and gratitude and elevation for other's justice. In what follows, I highlight several practical and research implications related to this model, as well as a positive approach to third-party reactions more generally.

Practical Implications

The ideas presented in this chapter have practical implications for managers and employees working in organizations. One important implication for managers is that both other's injustice and justice can have an impact on employee reactions even if they were not directly affected. The extant third-party literature tends to warn managers that if they treat an employee unfairly it can have a negative effect on other employees. The ideas provided in this chapter suggest a positive way to view this process. Specifically, treating an employee fairly can lead to positive reactions by others in the organization, which ultimately can improve the work environment through such actions such as improved job attitudes, citizenship behavior, and ultimately, performance. Thus, managers should be aware that utilizing fair decisions, procedures, and interpersonal treatment can lead to positive outcomes not just for the person receiving the treatment but also for others in the organization.

A useful implication for employees involves how to best respond to other's injustice. Typically, scholars have examined negative responses, such as retaliation, punishment, withdrawal, and negative emotions. This approach is reasonable, given the types of responses most of us would have to witnessing a coworker being treated unfairly. However, the model presented in this chapter suggests that employees should be aware of their emotional reaction, and consider constructive ways of responding. Ultimately, harnessing one's righteous anger and/or empathy to provide compassionate responses to the victim (as opposed to blaming the victim) and interacting with the perpetrator using a constructive approach (as opposed to retaliating or withdrawing) will likely lead to the best outcome in the future.

Research Implications

This chapter provides several avenues for future research directions. The greatest priority is empirically testing the theoretical model presented. It is important to empirically examine whether justice and injustice are associated with different third-party reactions and through different affective mechanisms. If support is found for this model, it will be important to extend the model.

One way to extend the model is to examine moderators. Are certain types of people more likely to respond to other's justice and injustice with positive emotional responses and/or constructive and prosocial reactions? For example, individuals higher in cognitive moral development (Kohlberg, 1969), dispositional empathy (Batson, 1991), moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999), and moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002) may have stronger reactions. Are some people more likely to respond to an injustice versus to just treatment? In addition, are there contextual variables that may serve as boundary conditions for the effects of other's justice and injustice on third-party reactions? For example, do reactions tend to be stronger when there is an ethical climate (Victor & Cullen, 1988) or the organization is virtuous (Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004)? Examining the model's boundary conditions is an important next step.

Another way to extend the model is to examine additional mechanisms. In the theoretical model presented in this chapter, I focused on outward-focused moral emotions. A focus on emotions is an important addition to the third-party reaction literature as the explanations have tended to be more cognitive (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). However, it would be interesting to examine alternative processes to better understand how other's justice and injustice are associated with positive types of reactions. For example, a third party may engage in a constructive response to another's injustice because of felt emotions, but it could also be because that individual has a strong identification with the organization and wants to ensure that she works in an ethical organization that treats people the right way. It would be fruitful to expand on the presented model by including additional mechanisms for why an individual would respond constructively to another's (in)justice.

One potential contribution of taking a positive lens to examine third-party reactions to others (in) justice is the acknowledgment that, typically, scholars

have focused on negative, or at the very least less than ideal, types of reactions. I highlight several constructive, compassionate, and prosocial reactions to other's (in)justice. Although I present several types of constructive responses, it would be interesting to develop a more detailed typology of the different ways in which an individual could engage in constructive behavior. Also, more conceptual and empirical work could be dedicated toward understanding what makes a response constructive, and how such responses can be operationalized. I view this as a particularly important domain for future inquiry.

Finally, I introduce the idea that justice and injustice are qualitatively different, as opposed to being ends of the same continuum. It is important for scholars to empirically test this idea to see if measures and manipulations of justice and injustice are distinct and have different antecedents and consequences. It would be useful to follow the lead of scholars who have made similar arguments for other constructs. For example, scholars demonstrated that positive and negative affect are distinct constructs, as opposed to ends of the same continuum (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Organizational justice scholars could similarly develop a measure of justice and a measure of injustice and establish that they are distinct from one another empirically, with unique antecedents and consequences. If injustice and justice are distinct, this has many implications for the third-party literature, as well as for the organizational justice literature more generally.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I present a positive approach to the study of third-party reactions, highlighting the benefits of integrating the literatures on organizational justice and POS. I argue that there is a natural marriage between these fields—especially when it comes to reactions to third-party (in)justice. My hope is that this chapter will encourage additional theory and research incorporating these domains as I believe there is much to gain by taking a positive lens to the study of organizational justice.

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