

Vicarious Justice Shapes Observers' Climate Perceptions: Moderating Role of Collectivism

Pooja Purang

Reactions to social accounts of justice have remained largely unexamined in the Indian context, though group harmony and loyalty are important aspects of the work place in collectivist cultures. Hence, others' experiences would be given importance and more likely integrated while forming justice judgments about organizations and authority figures. To fill this gap this study examines the effects of vicarious justice on perceptions of procedural justice climate and employee engagement, with collectivist values as a moderator. A field experiment was conducted on 67 respondents. The findings showed that vicarious justice influences climate perceptions for high collectivists only and procedural justice climate mediated the relationship between vicarious justice and employee engagement.

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Introduction

Reactions to employee mistreatment outside the dyad of victim and transgressor influence perceptions of fairness judgments of organizations and individuals and are relevant for varied reasons. Third party perspectives, comprise the large number of third parties e.g. co-workers, friends and others who get information through the organizational grapevine and social media about a victim's mistreatment, can influence the victim's reaction (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005; Barley, 1991). Also members learn vicariously about the treatment they can expect from the organization and superiors which would further influence their attitudes on the job. Lastly, third party responses define the scope and norms that regulate human behavior providing insights into acceptable ethical behavior in organizations. How an observer reacts to another's negative experience involves the perceptions of injustice and understanding this viewpoint would provide more insights in the existing literature on justice theory and evolution of unethical behavior in an organization.

Prior research has identified specific outcomes due to vicarious experiences

These studies highlight that vicarious justice influences attitudes and behavior of observers in an organization.

in the organizational setting like lowering of fairness perceptions (van den Bos & Lind, 2001), negative effect on respondents who are identified with the group, reduction of group engagement of observers (Okimoto, 2009), reduced work performance and lowered commitment (Brockner et al., 1987), high levels of emotional labor (Spencer & Rupp, 2009) and positive emotions in vicarious punishment condition of unethical behavior (Trevino & Ball, 1992). These studies highlight that vicarious justice influences attitudes and behavior of observers in an organization based on which this study attempts to look at how vicarious justice influences perceptions of procedural justice climate in an organization as fairness judgments of supervisors and organization can be learned vicariously. Furthermore, fairness perceptions also guide engagement (Saks, 2006; Kahn, 1990). However, this has remained unexamined in the context of vicarious justice so this study also aims to investigate the effect of vicarious justice on employee engagement. Since corporations today are constantly engaged in increasing commitment and engagement of employees to the organization it is important to examine factors that enhance engagement. Also cross cultural variations in outcomes of justice have been established by research, thus to fully investigate the effects of vicarious justice examining them with collectivist values would help improve the understanding of

the notion of justice in the contemporary Indian settings. More clarity on norms that guide fairness perceptions of observers and reasons for their reactions to such incidences would provide new ideas on improving ethical behavior in Indian workplaces.

Development of Procedural Justice Climate

Individuals in an organization observe others in their groups and form judgments about fairness of procedures experienced by other members and how these can affect them, and sometimes procedural injustice against one can be interpreted as an injustice against the entire group (Naumann & Bennett, 2000). At the same time research also identifies climate perceptions that reflect meaning derived from the organizational context like policies, practices and procedures that an organization rewards or supports (James, Joyce & Slocum, 1988). Similarly a procedural justice climate can exist guided by policies, practices and procedures in the organization that communicate procedural justice to employees. Thus procedural injustice against another member can imply possibility of such treatment for observers and hence shaping perceptions of procedural justice climate in the organization even when one is not the victim of the ill-treatment. Furthermore, the fairness heuristic theory provides fairness as a social heuristic to deal with the fundamental social dilemma¹ in the organizational setting, and

¹The two fundamental social dilemmas refer to the concern about investing time, effort and resources in an organizational relationship and to be dependent on others and their choices about one's

justice relevant information leads to formation of general justice judgments which further guide social decisions and interpretations of new information (Lind, 2001). In organizational settings individuals may use social accounts in the absence of personal experiences to draw on. Hence others' experiences can provide indicators of fairness that may lead to perceptions of work environment and thereby influence the observers' behavior and attitudes. Based on the above arguments, this study hypothesizes vicarious justice influences procedural justice climate.

Hypothesis 1: Vicarious justice positively effects perceptions of procedural justice climate.

Vicarious Justice Shapes Employee Engagement

Employee engagement was first defined by Kahn (1990) as harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances. Engagement is fostered by the development of three psychological states i.e. meaningfulness, availability and safety. Schaufeli et al. (2006) defined work engagement as a positive, fulfilling work-related motivational state of mind characterized by dedication, vigor and absorption. It represents a psychological and a motivational state, wherein employees invest

outcomes. The second refers to the concern for linking one's identity in a relationship, role or organization. By linking one's identity one runs the risk of being rejected or excluded which can lead to negative identity consequences.

in their work and promote organizational goals.

Prior research on justice has found positive effects of fairness on higher satisfaction, motivation to improve (Latham et al., 2005; Cawley et al., 1998; Maslach & Leiter, 2008) and higher perceptions of procedural justice are likely reciprocated by higher organizational engagement (Saks, 2006). Kahn (1990) found that transformational leaders who incorporate interactional and fair leadership styles create meaning for employees which is necessary for engagement. Den Hartog and Belschak (2012) found that work engagement mediates the relationship between ethical leader behavior which was characterized by fair and respectful treatment of followers and positive and negative discretionary behaviors such as counterproductive behavior. Research on different aspects of well-being in the workplace explains the effects of different forms of justice to the employees perceiving they are fairly rewarded, believing they are being interacted with respectfully and are receiving timely and accurate explanations (Lawson, Noblet & Rodwell, 2009). The above studies highlight the role of fairness in enhancing different forms of engagement by providing what inputs about the treatment to expect from the organization. However, most of this research has examined the direct experiences of justice, but vicarious justice also provides cues about the treatment, specially, in a coun-

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try like India. Studies on cross cultural differences in employee engagement have found in Indian organizations engagement manifested around a sense of community and community activities. Meaningfulness was seen as an antecedent of employee engagement which was concluded from the inter-meshing of the employer within the local community. (Kelliher, Hailey & Farndale, 2013). Also the job resources paradigm provides social support like supervisory and co-worker support and team climate as antecedents of employee engagement. (Rothmann, 2013). Thus, based on the above arguments we propose that vicarious justice would provide insights to the treatment an employee can expect and the fairness climate in the organization which would further shape employee engagement.

Hypothesis 2: Procedural justice climate would mediate the relationship between vicarious justice and employee engagement.

Justice in the Cultural Context

Greenberg and Colquitt (2005) suggest a three stage model that consists of justice rules, criteria and practices be used to organize cross-cultural literature on organizational justice because there are substantial cultural variations in the salience and preference for justice rules, criteria and practices. Value orientations like Individualism/collectivism and power distance influence justice perceptions by providing a conceptual basis for organizing and interpreting outcomes and events. While, majority of research on organizational justice was done in the western context, studies (Yoon, 1996; Leung et

al., 1996) report different outcomes of justice, hence, limiting the generalizability of findings across different cultures.

Previous research by social scientists in India provides a traditional view of justice gleaned from various Hindu texts likes Ramayana, Dharamshastras etc. The concept of justice is incorporated in the spiritualist philosophy of Hindu thought, however, no explicit definition of the concept of justice is provided (Krishnan, 1992). A strong prescriptive element exists with the term “neeti” (ethical or moral codes) as an expression of justice and emphasis is laid on deservingness, with action-outcome orientation and deservingness in specific situations like distribution of resources (Sinha, 1998 & Krishnan, 1992). Krishnan (1992) further states that contemporary studies of distributive justice in India are more influenced by “western” perspectives and no resonance of the traditional Indian views has been found.

Recent research on justice in the Indian context has been very diverse. Singh et al. (2009) report that justice perceptions are determined by social contextual factors like religion and caste; in the organizational setting dimensions of leader-member exchange effect different forms of justice differentially (Kumar & Singh, 2011); procedural justice and distributive justice mediate the impact of leader-member exchange on subordinate outcomes

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(Bhal & Ansari, 2007); relating procedural justice and distributive justice to outcomes like job satisfaction, organizational commitment (Bakshi, Kumar & Rani, 2009) and employee engagement (Biswas, Varma & Ramaswami, 2013). All these researchers have focused on justice perceptions from the individual's perspective but the third party perspective remains relatively unexplored. At the same time, cross-cultural research emphasizes harmony, team cohesiveness and maintaining good internal and external relationships as criterion of justice in collectivistic cultures (Early, 1989; Cohen & Avrahami, 2006). Group harmony and loyalty are important aspects of the work place, in collectivist cultures other experiences would be given importance and integrated more while forming justice judgment about organizations and authority figures. In such a culture the social accounts of injustice in the workplace should have considerable impact and lead to strong reactions. Vicarious injustice could also be perceived by collectivists as a challenge to the harmonious relationships of the group members that are important. Hence, we

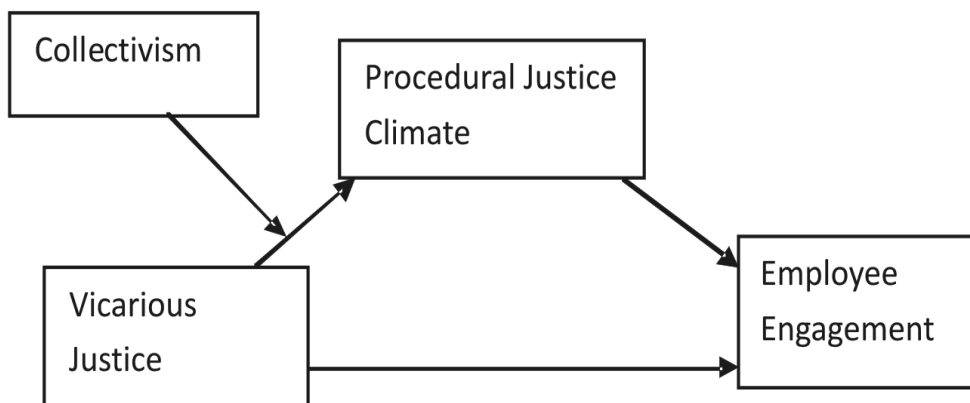
argue that vicarious justice experiences will be important in a collectivist society like India and collectivist values will act as a moderator in strengthening the effects of vicarious justice on procedural justice climate.

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Hypothesis 3: Collectivist values will moderate the effect of vicarious justice on procedural justice climate such that the effect of vicarious justice on procedural justice climate will be stronger for high collectivists.

Thus summing up we propose a model (Fig 1) that vicarious justice perceptions shape perceptions of procedural justice climate which in turn effects employee engagement.. Furthermore, the collectivist values will moderate the effect of vicarious justice on procedural justice climate.

Figure 1 A Moderated Mediation Model Showing Effects of Vicarious Justice on Employee Engagement



Methodology

A field experiment was conducted to examine the vicarious justice perceptions and its effects on climate and engagement. 67 individuals responded to the request for participation, volunteers were sought by sending mails to HR managers/ heads of various organizations the researcher was interacting with regarding training workshops. Questionnaires were mailed to the HR managers who further distributed the same to employees across different levels in the organization.

Procedures & Participants

The researcher used the scenario methodology; with role playing vignettes being used to manipulate the high vicarious justice and low vicarious justice and in-group/out-group membership. The researcher randomly distributed different versions of the scenario based surveys to the working professionals during training programs or were communicated to others through HR managers. There were two versions of the scenario and the participants responded to either. The study was conducted in English, as all the participants were fluent with the language. The respondents were given hypothetical situations in which they were asked to imagine themselves as employees of an organization, an IT company. The scenario described the situation from the perspective of a co-worker who was denied voice, in a situation, by the organization. Their reactions on hearing of the incident were tapped using questionnaires on procedural justice climate, collectivist values and employee engagement.

Sample

The sample of 67 employees had 39 males and 28 females. Their ages ranged from 21 years to 59 years. The mean age was 31.89 and the number of years of work experience ranged from 3 months to 37 years. The mean was 12.18.

Measures & Manipulations

Independent variable: Vicarious justice was studied as the independent variable. Role playing vignettes were used for manipulating the voice that was provided the co-workers as fair or unfair treatment of co-workers. In the high procedural justice condition, the manager was fair to 'A'.

"....Few days back A- your co-worker was removed from his/her current project and asked to move into leadership training. His/her manager (X) informed him/her about the removal and patiently explained challenges caused by duplication of skills with a new trainee joining the project. The Manager explained that as A was more experienced it was time for A to move into middle management roles for which the new training was essential. The manager also reassured A about working with HR to find a senior role for A on another project and to ensure A's previous consistent performance does not go unnoticed."

In the low justice condition, the manager denies voice to 'A'.

“...Few days back A- your co-worker was removed from his/her current project and placed on the bench. His/her manager (X) informed A about the removal without providing any reasons and overlooking A's excellent performance record. The manager stated that A did not fit in anymore and without acknowledging A's dismay asked A to communicate directly with HR for all concerns.”

Mediator, Moderator & Dependent Variables: 5 items were used to measure for procedural justice climate by Colquitt et al, (2002), 15 were taken to measure collectivism by Triandis (1996) and 9 items were taken from Schaufeli and Bakker(2003) for employee engagement. The alpha coefficient for collectivism was 0.893; the alpha coefficient for procedural justice climate was 0.870; the alpha coefficient for the employee engagement scale was 0.941.

Manipulation Checks

The researcher conducted manipulation checks using two items to test for the manipulation of procedural justice. The two items were: “A’ was given the opportunity to voice his/her opinion,” “A

has been able to influence the outcomes arrived”. The independent samples t test for the first item showed significant mean differences between high justice condition, M=2.418, low justice condition M=1.852, t= -3.914, p<.01df=65; and for the second item, showed significant mean differences between high justice condition M=2.508, and low justice condition M=2.017, t= -3.548 p<.01, df=65. The differences between the two conditions were therefore significant for the variation in high and low conditions of justice.

Analysis

Descriptive Statistics & Correlations: Means, standard deviations, internal consistency estimates and correlations for all the study variables are shown in Table 1. The alpha coefficients for the variables were more than the minimum value of .7 recommended for research. (Coaley, 2010). The coefficients of correlation were positive and significant between procedural justice climate and employee engagement. Collectivism had significant negative correlation with procedural justice climate. The correlations were below .9 hence no multicollinearity was seen between the variables.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics & Inter-correlations between the Variables

| Variables | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|---------|-------|-------|
| Procedural justice climate | 13.48 | 4.57 | (.87) | | |
| Collectivism | 57.73 | 10.08 | -.401** | (.89) | |
| Employee Engagement | 29.99 | 8.83 | .490** | -.178 | (.94) |

Note: N= 67, * p<.05& **p<.01. The alpha coefficients are given in parenthesis.

Further conditional process analysis through PROCESS MACROS (Model 7)

was used to examine the moderated mediation relationships with procedural jus-

Collectivist orientations moderate the vicarious justice procedural climate relationship which is seen in the significant interaction effect.

tice climate as a mediator and collectivism as a moderator. The results in the first regression equation shows (Table 2) that collectivist orientations moderate the vicarious justice procedural climate relationship which is seen in the significant interaction effect ($\beta=.208^*$, $R^2= .236$). Though the direct effect of vicarious justice is not significant on procedural justice climate with the effect of vicarious

justice on procedural justice climate ($\beta=-10.593$), however as Hayes (2013) provides for a moderation effect to be significant, the interaction effect has to be significant even if the direct effects of the independent variable or the moderator are not significant. Furthermore procedural justice climate was examined as a mediator in the vicarious justice- employee engagement relationship. The second regression equation shows that while the effect of vicarious justice on employee engagement is not significant ($\beta=.392$), procedural justice climate has a significant effect on employee engagement ($\beta=.937^{**}$, $R^2= .240$). Furthermore the direct effects of vicarious justice on em-

Table 2 Moderating Mediation Relationship with Procedural Justice Climate and Collectivism

| | Procedural Justice Climate | Employee Engagement | | | |
|---|--|--|--------|--------|-------|
| 1st regression | | | | | |
| Vicarious Justice | B= -10.593, t=-1.793 | | | | |
| Collectivism | B= -.499, t=-3.039** | | | | |
| VJX Collectivism (Interaction) | B=.208, t=2.059*; $R^2=.236$; F=6.470**, df=3, 63; | | | | |
| 2nd Regression | | | | | |
| Vicarious Justice | | B=.392, t=.202 | | | |
| Procedural Justice Climate | | B=.937, t=4.382**; $R^2=.240$, F=10.114**; df=2,64 | | | |
| Direct effect of vicarious justice on employee engagement | | | | | |
| | Effect | T | p | LLCI | ULCI |
| | .392 | .202 | .841 | -3.498 | 4.283 |
| Conditional indirect effect at different levels of the moderator | | | | | |
| | Collectivism | Effect | BootSE | LLCI | ULCI |
| Procedural justice climate (PJC) | 47.655 ("1SD) | -.659 | 1.243 | -3.069 | 1.929 |
| PJC | 57.731 (Mean) | 1.299 | 1.088 | -.371 | 3.879 |
| PJC | 67.808 (+1SD) | 3.259 | 1.732 | .554 | 7.411 |
| Index of moderated mediation | | | | | |
| | Index | SE(Boot) | LLC | ULCI | |
| PJC | .194 | .103 | .023 | .428 | |

Note; N =67, Non-standardized coefficients are reported. Bootstrap sample size = 5000, 95% bootstrap confidence interval is reported. * $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$.

For high collectivist orientation individuals, procedural justice climate does shape employee engagement.

Employee engagement are not significant however the results of moderated mediation show that for high collectivist orientation individuals, procedural justice climate does shape employee engagement. Thus, the moderator mediating hypothesized relationship is significant between vicarious justice and employee engagement. Thus our hypotheses 2 and 3 are accepted.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that in this sample vicarious justice does not directly influence procedural justice but the interaction effect of vicarious justice and collectivism is significant. Hayes (2013) provides that due to the different ways by which the independent variable and the moderator may be measured may influence their direct effect on the mediator, to conclude whether the moderated effect occurs on the interaction effect should be examined. Which was found to be significant hence vicarious justice results influences procedural justice climate only for high collectivism. This shows that in India individuals who are highly collectivist are influenced by the fairness experiences of their co-workers, which could imply that integration of vicarious experiences in the general fairness judgment of observers (Lind, 2001). Furthermore, the results also showed that procedural justice climate

does mediate the effect of vicarious justice on employee engagement. We can conclude that integrating vicarious experiences in the general fairness judgment implies forming of overall evaluation of the organization based on others experiences which would consequently shape employee attitudes and behavior in the organization. This extends the research on justice that found higher procedural justice improving well-being and engagement (Lawson et al, 2009; Saks, 2006) to including co-worker's treatment also shaping perceptions about the work environment and thereby influencing employee engagement in an organization.

Implications

The findings highlight the importance of fairness for all in an organizational setting, especially in collectivist cultures. It is important for organizations to develop fair processes that are widely communicated to all. As not just victims but third parties are also influenced by decisions taken, specially in times of uncertainty, even when they may not be directly impacted by it. A fair working climate would make employees sure of the treatment they can expect from the organization and hence make them more engaged and ready to invest time and effort on behalf of the organization. The results also showed that procedural justice climate is guided by vicarious justice for those high on collectivism. This implies that social accounts are taken seriously by collectivists and hence would more likely shape behavior at work. They would be more strongly guided by norms they see prevalent around them than di-

rect communication they may receive from the organization.

Limitations & Future Research

In an attempt to capture reactions to vicarious justice perceptions this study used a field experiment, though we got responses from a small sample only which does place limitations on the generalizability of the findings. Also since this study used only one source of data the problem of common method variance could also be a challenge. Future research could use cross sectional research to capture responses to real life ill-treatment of co-workers with a bigger sample which help validate the findings of this study. Using interviews and experimental designs along with the cross-sectional study would help deal with common method variance. Secondly, the kind of unfairness used was a voice manipulation; studies could also examine other forms of vicarious injustice and their effects to draw deeper insights into the notion of justice in an organizational setting. Furthermore, research refers to justice as a felt experience; hence future researches could use emotional reactions and perceived organizational support as mediators in the model as well. Also examining other value orientations like power distance and importance of justice as moderators would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the notion of justice.

Conclusions

The findings of this study show that among working professionals we

see the formation of the global fairness judgment in response to vicarious perceptions of justice. This perception then shapes individuals evaluation of future situations and guides their actions and attitudes in an organization. In this study the perception of fairness climate is seen as a predictor of employee engagement and this effect is stronger in people high on collectivist orientations.

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