Organizational Justice in Corrections Settings

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Organizational justice is a framework for understanding an employee’s perception of fairness in their workplace and an important component of correctional staff’s workplace experiences. Organizational justice includes fairness in processes (procedural justice), outcomes (distributive justice), and treatment (interactional justice). Research suggests correctional officers’ perceptions of organizational justice—particularly procedural justice—are related to other attitudes and competencies, such as their commitment to their organization and the extent to which they understand and agree with its goals. These attitudes are important for reforming systems and changing organizational cultures in support of such reforms. Creating a humane prison environment requires correctional staff who treat people who are incarcerated in a procedurally just manner, but this can be difficult if those staff perceive they are not treated fairly by the system.

BOX 1
The Prison Research and Innovation Initiative

This brief is part of a larger research agenda for the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative, a five-year effort to leverage research and evidence to shine a much-needed light on prison conditions and pilot strategies to promote the well-being of people who live and work behind bars. The forthcoming research agenda aims to change the national narrative on corrections so that it embodies data-driven transformative innovations for reform and inclusive research approaches to build transparency and
accountability for safer and more humane environments for people confined and working in them. This living document covers several topics ranging from prison climate to redemption and desistance, and will be updated regularly to remain relevant to discourse occurring around us.

Research on the impact of organizational justice is often restricted to measures of officer wellness and to officers’ orientation toward their jobs (e.g., acceptance of change and commitment to organizational goals). Most research omits other important factors like whether officers are treated fairly and respectfully by their organization, officers’ ability to build healthy rapport with people who are incarcerated, and whether officers treat people who are incarcerated fairly and respectfully. The organizational justice literature relies heavily on survey research and could benefit if researchers incorporate more analysis of administrative and qualitative data. Research also lacks evaluations of efforts to make corrections settings more organizationally just, and of what outcomes such efforts produce.

**Problem Statement**

The organizational justice framework concerns whether staff feel they are treated fairly in the workplace (Lambert, Hogan, and Griffin 2007; Taxman and Gordon 2009). Organizational justice has three main components: distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice. Distributive justice focuses on a decision’s outcomes (e.g., workplace promotion or discipline), procedural justice focuses on the decisionmaking that leads to those outcomes, and interactional justice focuses on whether organizations treat staff with dignity and respect (Boateng and Hsieh 2019a). Interactional justice was originally defined as the displaying of social sensitivity when explaining decisions, the showing of empathy, and the respectful and dignifying treatment of employees (Skarlicki and Folger 1997). However, it has since been split into two areas: informational justice and interpersonal justice (Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007). Informational justice refers to the degree to which organizations provide information and explanations to staff and staff perceive them as truthful, and interpersonal justice focuses on whether staff feel that their organization treats them with dignity and respect (Boateng and Hsieh 2019a).

Although important in any workplace, fair treatment is particularly important for people working in prisons because such environments are extremely taxing. Correctional staff experience greater stress than people in most occupations, which can negatively impact health and well-being (Lerman and Harney 2019; Wells, Colbert, and Slate 2006). For example, correctional staff are twice as likely to develop cardiovascular disease (Wells, Colbert, and Slate 2006), and they experience family and work conflicts more frequently because of job-related stress (Lambert, Hogan, and Allen 2006). The national annual employee turnover rate in corrections is estimated to be between 12 and 25 percent (Hill 2004; Lambert 2001; Lommel 2004).

Organizational justice could mitigate the stressors that lead to these outcomes, whereas its absence could exacerbate them. Studies examining stress among correctional officers have mainly looked at
environmental factors and work conditions, such as violence. Recent studies exploring employees’ perceptions of fairness suggest that management directly impacts officers’ experiences and that officer stress and wellness is not primarily determined by officers’ interactions with people who are incarcerated (Lerman and Harney 2019; Tewksbury and Higgins 2006).

Correctional officers and other correctional staff can experience trauma in the workplace due to work conditions and the challenges inherent in prison work, and their interactions with people who are incarcerated determine their facilities’ organizational climates. Many staff also struggle with dual loyalty, the tension between their responsibility to offer care-based services (such as programming and health care) in settings that require them to promote security (Glowa-Kollisch et al. 2015). Working in a system that can compromise people’s personal and professional ethics can pose unique challenges, particularly in high-risk settings.

A correctional institution’s level of organizational justice may affect how people who are incarcerated there are treated. In the policing context, evidence suggests police officers are more likely to support fair and respectful treatment of community members when their department has internal procedural justice (Van Craen and Skogan 2017). People attempting to help police departments treat the public more respectfully by changing departmental cultures consider a lack of internal procedural justice a barrier or threat to that work (Jannetta et al. 2019). Given the parallels between corrections and policing, it seems likely that the presence or lack of organizational justice will impact how correctional staff treat people who are incarcerated and whether they support organizational change.

Literature Review

Only a few researchers have studied organizational justice’s impact on correctional staff. This research tends to substantiate the relationship between organizational justice and measures of the difficulties of correctional work, such as job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Two of the earliest studies surveyed correctional staff at one prison about their perceptions of organizational justice, work commitment, and job satisfaction (Lambert 2003; Lambert, Hogan, and Griffin 2007), finding that staff who considered processes and procedures equitable were more likely to be satisfied with their jobs. In a survey of 1,200 correctional officers in one US state, Taxman and Gordon (2009) found a strong inverse relationship between perceptions of organizational justice and job stress, and a strong positive relationship between perceptions of organizational justice and organizational commitment. Lambert and coauthors (2019) also found that measures of organizational justice explained 22 percent of the variance of job stress in a survey of 322 correctional staff. Other studies have found that organizational justice reduces job burnout (Lambert et al. 2010). Most studies of organizational justice have specifically examined its distributive justice and procedural justice components, and findings suggest the procedural justice component has stronger and more consistent relationships to the outcomes studied.

There is a need to explore how interactional justice affects correctional staff. Lambert and coauthors (2019) found that interpersonal justice had a direct effect on lowering job stress and indirect
effects on lowering job stress through its influence on perceptions of procedural and distributive justice. Using measures of interactional justice (i.e., a combined measure of informational and interpersonal justice), Boateng and Hsieh (2019b) found that only interactional justice was associated with lower job stress among correctional staff in Ghana, whereas distributive and procedural justice was not. No study examining how informational justice affects correctional staff has been published. This is an important avenue of investigation that could identify easily applicable areas for improvement, as treating staff with respect and providing truthful information is not expensive and could improve correctional workplaces for staff and people who are incarcerated.

Extant research also suggests organizational justice is associated with outcomes that could improve treatment of people who are incarcerated, and it supports the argument that organizations should take steps to increase staff perceptions of organizational justice. Studies have also found that organizational justice is associated with increased officer support for treatment programming for people who are incarcerated (Lambert, Hogan, and Barton-Bellessa 2011) and improved organizational citizenship, defined as exceeding job requirements (Lambert and Hogan 2013). In a study looking solely at the procedural justice component of organizational justice, officers in procedurally just environments reported lower levels of fear and perceived risk of victimization (by fellow officers or people who are incarcerated) than officers in environments that were not procedurally just (Taxman and Gordon 2009). Officers working in environments that were more procedurally just were also more likely to accept change, be more committed to their organization, and better understand and agree with its goals.

Studies have used surveys to examine the extent to which officers and staff feel their organization is organizationally just, and analyses have focused on relationships between organizational justice (and its subcomponents) and self-reported outcomes of interest, such as job stress and organizational commitment (Lambert 2003; Lambert, Hogan, and Griffin 2007; Taxman and Gordon 2009). Such research has generated substantial evidence that organizational justice impacts how correctional staff think about their work, as well as their health and well-being. This line of research has not connected staff views and perceptions to outcomes that are not self-reported (such as use of sick days or use of force), has not collected data longitudinally to better understand long-term change and potential causal relationships, and has not collected qualitative data to probe how correctional staff and managers understand and apply organizational justice.

Opportunities to Develop Knowledge and Innovate Policy

Although promising research on organizational justice is emerging, researchers have noted gaps in the literature on how supervisors treat correctional officers (Lambert et al. 2019; Taxman and Gordon 2009). Research on procedural and distributive justice has focused on work-related stress and relied on self-reports from officers that sometimes have low response rates. Furthermore, the few studies examining how fairness and equity impact correctional officers’ experiences did not look at objective measures of officer outcomes such as sick leave or the rates at which staff transfer to other institutions
Opportunities also exist to tie perceptions of organizational justice more directly to the workplace outcomes that characterize distributive justice, such as pay, promotions, benefits, and disciplinary action. We need more knowledge about these outcomes that pertain to organizational justice.

We also need to better understand how organizational justice impacts correctional staff’s interactions with people who are incarcerated. Connecting measures of organizational justice with measures of officer or staff behavior, such as use of force, could achieve this goal, as could surveying correctional staff about their views of organizational justice and surveying people who are incarcerated about whether correctional staff treat them fairly and respectfully. Research on policing suggests that when supervisors treat officers fairly, officers are more likely to treat the public fairly (Haas et al. 2015; Reynolds, Fitzgerald, and Hicks 2017; Rosenbaum and McCarty 2017; Van Craen and Skogan 2017). Such research examined outcomes including absenteeism, self-protective behaviors, organizational commitment, and police misconduct. Similar constructs can be applied to correctional settings. Moreover, correctional management’s perspectives are usually absent in studies of organizational justice. Including those perspectives and assessing prison management’s awareness and use of procedural justice principles will provide a more robust picture of organizational justice in corrections settings.

Lastly, an opportunity exists to develop and experimentally test interventions to make corrections agencies and settings more organizationally just. Doing so will build knowledge about whether and how such interventions impact staff, prisons, and people who are incarcerated.

Limitations and Other Considerations

The literature on organizational justice in corrections has several other limitations. Most studies on organizational justice in correctional facilities are based on surveys of correctional officers and staff. Such studies would be more robust if response rates were higher and if they surveyed prison staff of all types and security levels. Previous studies have struggled with low response rates, and in some cases, surveys had to be readministered with additional information to get officers to participate. Longitudinal research is needed to see how organizational justice changes and how its subcomponents (i.e., distributive, procedural, informational, and interpersonal justice) are causally related.

Moreover, research could explore how organizational justice differs for correctional officers and other correctional staff. It could also examine how characteristics of staff members such as race, ethnicity, tenure, education, and experience interact with their perceptions of organizational justice and its effects on staff conduct and performance.

Researchers have used surveys more than focus groups, interviews, and administrative data, and studies consequently often lack richness and context that mixed-methods approaches could provide. Focus groups can provide useful contextual information. And while the lack of administrative data about correctional officers suggests such data may be difficult to obtain (Butler et al. 2019), partnering with
practitioners could help researchers access and integrate administrative data into the correctional organizational justice literature.

Note

1 See Lambert (2003); Lambert, Hogan, and Griffin (2007); Lambert and coauthors (2010); Lambert and coauthors 2019; Lambert and Hogan (2013); Lambert, Hogan, and Barton-Bellessa (2011); Lambert, Hogan, and Cheeseman (2013); and Taxman and Gordon (2009).

References


**Additional Reading**

See the works that follow for additional information and studies of organizational justice in corrections settings.


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