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Turnover Intentions and Political Influence Behavior:

A Test of Fight/Flight Responses to Organizational Injustice

Rehana Aafaqi

University Science Malaysia at Penang

Tel: +60-4-653-3888 ext. 3368

Fax: +60-4-657-7448

E-Mail: mahfooz@usm.my

Mahfooz A. Ansari

University Science Malaysia at Penang

Tel: +60-4-653-3888 ext. 3435

Fax: +60-4-657-7448

E-Mail: mahfooz@usm.my

Chow May Sim

University Science Malaysia at Penang

Tel: +60 4-642-7691

E-Mail: maysim.chow@dhl.com

Zainal Ariffin Ahmad

University Science Malaysia at Penang

Tel: +60-4-653-2523

Fax: +60-4-657-7448

E-Mail: zaba@usm.my

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mahfooz A. Ansari, School of Management, University Science Malaysia, 11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia; E-Mail: mahfooz@usm.my.

Abstract

We examined the role of organizational frustration as a linking mechanism between the perception of organizational injustice and fight (political influence behavior)/flight (turnover intentions) responses. The participants were 201 middle-level managers drawn from manufacturing and logistic companies in northern Malaysia. Data were collected by means of a structured questionnaire. Whereas all the three elements of injustice--procedural, distributive, and interpersonal—had significant positive impact on turnover intentions and political influence behavior, only procedural injustice and distributive injustice had such impact on frustration. Organizational frustration played a partial mediating role in the relationship of distributive and procedural injustice with turnover intentions and political influence behavior. Implications of the findings and directions for future research are suggested.

Turnover Intentions and Political Influence Behavior:

A Test of Fight/Flight Responses to Organizational Injustice

The success of an organization depends not only on the strategies used or on its financial strength, but also on employees' choice of behaviors. The behavioral choice of employees--especially the executive group--may have important implications for organizational capabilities and success in the long term. However, owing to increasingly globalized economy in the new millennium, the success of an organization to encourage the retention of high performers in a tight labor market--particularly the skilled ones--has become more challenging. Skilled employees are of great importance to an organization but at the same time they are in acute shortage.

The importance of employee turnover is evidenced by the extensive research done in this area. Past research has linked various situational factors or human resource management practices to turnover or withdrawal cognitions (Lee & Heard, 2000). However, under certain circumstances, intent to turnover may not be the choice even with the presence of the factors mentioned earlier. According to the "fight-or-flight syndrome," defined as a genetically programmed survival trait dating back to the early history of mankind, a person is able to react immediately to a situation by running away (i.e., flight) from an unjust environment. But, the alternative to having the intentions to quit is resorting to using political influence tactics (i.e., fight) to reconstitute the unfavorable situation. Because of the possible destructive power of turnover intentions and political influence behaviors, the present research has been designed with an objective of exploring the nature of these phenomena by looking at their relationship with organizational injustice and frustration as a potential mediator.

Fairness or unfairness in the workplace is one of the most important elements that determines the choice of action and work performance of an employee. Impacts of organizational injustice experienced in the workplace are bound to adversely affect operational efficiency and profitability through negative behavioral responses. Thus, this study examines the relationship between injustice perceptions and two work related behaviors, turnover intentions and political influence behavior. Stated differently, the primary objective of this study was to investigate whether the four elements of injustice relate in a similar manner to turnover intentions and political influence behavior. It was also designed to investigate how organizational frustration mediates the relationship between organizational injustice and fight/flight responses, turnover intentions and political influence behavior. Understanding these impacts will allow organizations to highlight the importance of preventing organizational injustice to create a better and more productive workforce.

Theoretical Framework and Development of Hypotheses

When individuals believe that their expectations about the treatment or outcome they receive are not met, an assessment of unfairness occurs. Organizational justice research often includes three forms of justice: distributive, procedural, and interactional (Bies & Moag, 1986). In Adam's (1965) conceptualization of organizational justice, the concept of inequity in distributive situation was introduced. This group of research focused on the fairness of pay or outcomes in work settings, which is commonly referred to as "distributive justice" (Deutsch, 1975). The focus on the fairness of the methods and procedures used in decision-making is referred to as "procedural justice" (Folger & Greenberg, 1985). Individuals put a lot of emphasis on the fairness of procedures. It has been observed that people are more concerned with the

interaction process (procedure) than the actual outcome (distributive justice) of the interaction (Lind & Tyler, 1988).

Interactional justice was added as a third element to the two-factor model of organizational justice. This element of justice was defined as the interpersonal treatment employee received as procedures are enacted (Bies & Moag, 1986). But, Greenberg (1993) came up with the suggestion of a four-factor structure of organizational justice by splitting interactional justice into two components of justice--informational and interpersonal—that stresses on socially-fair treatment. Informational justice refers to the adequacy of information used to explain how decisions are derived, whereas interpersonal justice is treated as the social interaction among individuals in an organizational setting. Colquitt (2001) and Farouk (2002) empirically supported the four-factor structure with distributive, procedural, informational, and interpersonal as distinct dimensions.

Turnover Intentions

The topic of separation or employee turnover has been popular among researchers (Hom & Griffeth, 1995; Maertz & Campion, 1998; Price, 1977). In their effort to understand the intentions to quit, researchers have been focusing on factors such as job satisfaction, availability of alternatives, expected utility, cost of switching job, and characteristics of present job (Hom & Griffeth, 1995; Hulin, Roznowski, & Hachiya, 1985; Mobley, 1977; Price & Mueller, 1981). Other factors that may influence an employee's decision to search for job and withdraw include age and gender (Steers & Mowday, 1981), job tenure (Taylor, Audia, & Gupta, 1996), reward systems (Dreher, 1982), compensations (Hom & Griffeth, 1995), and perceived alternatives (Gerhert, 1990). Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982) found that organizational commitment leads to a reduction in withdrawal cognition. Meaningful work and opportunities for promotion

significantly relates to employees' intentions to leave (Miller & Wheeler, 1992). Lind and Tyler (1988) suggested that employees would be more likely to leave their organizations if they feel that evaluation procedures are unfair. A field study conducted by Masterson and Taylor (1996) reported that procedural justice perceptions significantly predicted intentions to leave the organization

In support of the findings by Lind and Tyler (1988) and Dailey and Kirk (1992), perceptions of procedural justice are proven to be negatively related to turnover intentions. In the Malaysian context, Ansari, Daisy, and Aafaqi (2000) have supported earlier findings that justice perceptions are negatively related to the intent to leave. Thus, the following hypothesis was framed:

H1 There is a positive relationship between the four elements of organizational injustice and turnover intentions.

Political Influence Behavior

Political activities are normally resorted to when there are uncertainties or disagreements about choices. Normally, when there are diverse interests, politics surface. Generally, people hold the perception that, in the normal course of events in an organization, one must play politics in order to survive. Organizational politics--defined as an attempt by employees to enhance their career prospects--involves intentional acts of influence to enhance or protect the self-interest of individuals or groups (Dubrin, 1994; Kipnis, 1974).

Past research has focused on the use of upward influence tactics--especially influence attempt directed at someone higher in the hierarchy (Ansari & Kapoor, 1987; Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980; Ralston, Vollmer, Srinivasan, Nicholson, Moureen, & Paulina, 2001; Thacker & Wayne, 1995; Wayne, Liden, Graf, & Ferris, 1997; Yukl, Falbe, & Youn, 1993). Thus, the

study of how lower-group participants influence the higher-group is essential (Likert, 1961). In this case, the agents of influence do not possess any formal authority over the target of influence. That is why, upward influence tactics are also regarded as a form of informal influence (Chacko, 1990).

Bacharach and Lawler (1980) found a relationship between injustice perceptions and political influence behavior. It was rationalized that those individuals who possess power to bring about changes in organizations may remain in their organization and stay politically active. Skarlicki and Folger (1997) found that when employees feel that injustice has occurred, they are motivated to restore fairness by engaging in retaliatory behaviors. Ambrose and Harland (1995) reported that politicking is associated with decreased perceptions of procedural and interactional fairness. Thus, based on the above literature, political influence behavior as a coping strategy would be expected to be an alternative to leaving an unfair environment. Thus, the following hypothesis is in order:

H2 There is a positive relationship between the four elements of organizational injustice and political influence behavior

Organization Frustration

Life is full of frustration. There are always some barriers or obstacles preventing the achievement of desired goals. In small doses, frustration may be considered a helpful emotion, motivating employees to try new methods or to find alternative solutions to problems. In situations where frustrations are related with one's job, intense feelings of dissatisfaction with the job may result. At this stage, the individual may dream change and normally take steps to produce a significant change. One option is through political influence behaviors if employees feel that change can be instituted. Otherwise, employees may be thinking of quitting the

organization if situations can not be restored. The classic frustration-aggression theory (Dollard, Doob, Millar, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939) treats aggression as a consequence of frustration. A person experiences frustration when an instigated goal-response or predicted behavioral-sequence is interrupted or interdicted (Fox & Spector, 1999). The individual looks for possible alternative responses for the goal that is blocked; however, if that does not occur, then an individual may respond with certain level of aggression.

Past research has shown that individuals under pressure will either behave aggressively or withdraw from an organization (Dollard et al., 1939; Spector, 1978). That is, when a person is subjected to psychological threats or stress in the form of frustration, the “fight or flight” phenomenon is commonly observed. After experiencing frustration, a person exhibits either an attack response or withdrawal response—fight or flight (Spielberger, Reheiser, & Syderman, 1995). Frustrated events have been found to cause feelings of perceived frustration (Storms & Spector, 1987). These situational constraints block individuals from achieving their goals, thus motivating an employee to find alternative paths to goal achievement that may include withdrawal from efforts to achieve organizational goals (Chen & Spector, 1992), engaging in interpersonal hostility or aggression such as strikes, work slowdown, withholding of output, or theft (Spector, 1978).

Consistent with the aforementioned logic, we believe that injustice perceptions will lead to frustration that will in turn lead to fight (political behavior) or flight (turnover intentions) responses. Thus, the following hypotheses were framed:

H3 There is a positive relationship between frustration and political influence behavior

H4 There is a positive relationship between frustration and turnover intentions

H5 All elements of organizational injustice correlate positively with frustration

H6 Frustration mediates the relationship between the different elements of organizational injustice and turnover intentions in such a way that the direct effect of organizational injustice will weaken after organization frustration is considered

H7 Frustration mediates the relationship between the different elements of organizational injustice and political influence behavior in such a way that the direct effect of organizational injustice will weaken after organization frustration is considered

Method

Participants and Procedure

We sent our survey questionnaire to a total of 315 middle level managers from four manufacturing (three foreign-owned and one locally-owned) and one logistics companies located in northern Malaysia. Completed questionnaires were received from 201 managers. They were evenly distributed in terms of gender composition. The majority (46.3%) were Chinese, followed by Indian (27.9%) and Malays (24.4%). They were in the age range of 23 to 55 years ($M = 32.38$; $SD = 5.99$). About 50% had earned at least a bachelor's degree. On average, they had been in their present organization for about 6 years ($SD = 4.38$).

Measures

We employed a 4-page questionnaire comprising measures of organizational frustration, turnover intentions, political influence tactics, and organizational injustice. All measures, except for personal-demographics, were anchored on a 7-point Likert scale.

Turnover intentions We employed a 5-item scale of turnover intentions (Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). The reliability coefficient was estimated at .97. Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, coefficients alpha, and intercorrelations among all study variables.

Political influence behavior Seven items were drawn from studies by Ansari (1990), Bhal and Ansari (2000), and Kipnis et al. (1980) to measure political influence behavior. The items were composed of blocking, defiance, and manipulation tactics. The reliability coefficient was found to be .94 (see Table 1).

Organizational injustice The Colquitt (2001) 20-item scale was adapted to suit organizational injustice. A varimax rotated principal components analysis constrained to only 11 significant items. The original four dimensions of injustice were reduced to only three factors and were renamed as interpersonal (3 items), procedural (4 items), and distributive injustice (4 items). The reliability coefficients ranged from .93 to .98 (see Table 1).

Organization frustration This scale comprised 14 items drawn from the work of Keenan and Newton (1984) and Spector (1978). The scale was found to be highly reliable (coefficient alpha = .97--see Table 1).

Results

To examine the mediating impact of organizational frustration on the relationship between organizational injustice and outcome variables (turnover intentions and political influence tactics), we followed Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedures in performing multiple regression analysis. In order to demonstrate that frustration acts as a mediator, the following conditions *must* be examined: (a) Organizational injustice must significantly predict outcome variables (Hypotheses 1 and 2); (b) Frustration must significantly predict outcomes----turnover intentions and political influence behavior (Hypotheses 3 and 4); (c) Organizational injustice must significantly predict frustration (Hypothesis 5); (d) After controlling for frustration, the power of organizational injustice to predict outcome variables should become significantly smaller (partial mediation) or non-significant (full mediation) (Hypotheses 6 and 7).

Thus, we performed two sets of hierarchical multiple regression analysis—one for political influence behavior and one for turnover intentions—to test the hypothesized relationships among the variables. Since past research (Mobley, 1977; Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979) has found organizational tenure significantly associated with outcome variables, we controlled it in each regression equation at the first step. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, all the conditions set by Baron and Kenny (1986) are more or less evident in the results—thus substantiating Hypotheses 1 through 5. However, the impact of interpersonal injustice on mediator (i.e., frustration) was non-significant. We next examined mediation hypotheses (Hypotheses 6 and 7). It was found (see Table 2) that these hypotheses received only partial support from the data. Frustration appeared to partially mediate the relationship of distributive injustice and procedural injustice with outcome variables (political influence behavior and turnover intentions)—see Figure 1.

Discussion

Organizational researchers have often suggested that organizations and managers need to look for ways to reduce organizational injustice in order to avoid negative behavioral responses. The present analysis revealed four important findings in support of this argument.

First, our analysis showed that organizational injustice was a significant predictor of turnover intentions, as hypothesized. This finding indicates that with higher level of perceived injustice, the participants have a greater tendency to leave the organization. This is consistent with previous research that examined the relationship between injustice and the intent to quit (Alexander & Ruderman, 1987; Lind & Tyler, 1988) the organization. The present research also received support from the earlier findings pertaining to the stronger predictive power of

procedural injustice to turnover intentions (Dailey & Kirk, 1992; Greenberg, 1990; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Masterson & Taylor, 1996).

Secondly, with respect to political influence behaviors, findings were also found to be consistent with those of the past research (Ambrose & Harland, 1995). It was found that organizational injustice was positively correlated with political influence tactics. That is, the higher the perception of unfair treatment in the organization, the greater the probability of using political influence tactics to reconstitute the unfavorable situation. This finding was apparent regardless of the dimensions of organizational injustice studied in the present research: procedural, distributive, or interpersonal.

Thirdly, the two elements of organizational injustice--procedural and distributive--were found to be significantly related to organizational frustration. This shows that employees will feel frustrated if they feel that they are being treated unfairly in terms of outcome allocation process and the outcome itself. This feeling of frustration will ultimately affect employees' decision to quitting the organization or engaging in devious influence tactics. Previous research (see such works as those of Fox & Spector, 1999) has also reported that work-related frustrated events were associated with negative responses among employees.

Fourthly, our analysis showed that distributive injustice and procedural injustice partially caused organizational frustration that in turn caused turnover intentions. The same finding was evident in the case of political influence behavior. In each case, the presence of frustration reduced the impact of injustice on outcome variables.

The present fight/flight model has some important implications--both theoretical and practical—for human resources management. From the theoretical perspective, perceptions of injustice—distributive as well as procedural--lead to organizational frustration, and this feeling

of frustration in turn leads to the intent to leave and the use of political influence tactics such as blocking, defiance, and manipulations.

At the same time, organizations should not neglect the interactional dimension of injustice in the workplace because this dimension was found to be positively correlated with turnover intentions and inclination to political influence tactics as well. This element of justice addresses issues such as whether an employee is treated with respect and dignity and is given sufficient or related information in order not to motivate them into negative behavioral response. Our results suggest that organizations should look for ways of improving or enhancing interpersonal justice. If employees see themselves as being unfairly treated, it may jeopardize the overall fairness perceptions toward the organization.

Our analysis pertaining to political influence behaviors indicates that if employees perceive that they are unfairly treated with respect to the three dimensions of justice--procedural, interpersonal, and distributive--they will be motivated to react through the use of political influence tactics. Yet another finding is that unfairness, especially with regard to distributive and procedural elements, will determine whether employees experience frustration in the work place. It will eventually affect either the intent to quit the organization or resort to political influence tactics. If the organization would like to improve its workforce retention rate or reduce the negative behavior of political influence activities, then they need to pay special attention to the issue of fairness outcomes in organizations.

Although this study makes several contributions to the relationship of organizational injustice with turnover intentions and political influence tactics, it is not free from potential limitations. The first limitation is the reliance on self-report measures. Future research should focus on at least two sources of data. Secondly, our data came only from the northern State of

Malaysia. Thus findings should be viewed with caution. Thirdly, the respondents of this study were predominantly middle management group. Again, the findings may not be generalized to other hierarchical levels within the organization. Finally, this study has limited the use of influence tactics to only the devious means of influence. In the actual setting, employees may also engage in rational and soft types of influence tactics--depending upon the perception on the violations of a particular dimension of organizational injustice.

A data limitations aside, this study has made some important contributions to the understanding of the antecedents of turnover intentions and political influence behavior. Future research should look at other contributing factors to turnover such as job tenure, gender, and age. Personality traits may be yet another influencing factor when examining political influence behavior and turnover intentions of employees.

It is also important to note that male and female may choose different influence tactics when faced with a similar situation (Arroba & James, 1987). Thus, future research may want to consider adding the variable of gender in the study. Future study should also include larger sample size, including employees at different organizational levels, and covering wider geographical areas in order to generalize the findings obtained.

In conclusion, it is important that organizations and managers alike should pay attention to the relationship among organizational justice, frustration, and turnover intentions and political influence tactics. Our findings clearly point out to the role of distributive and procedural injustice in engendering political behavior and intent to quit the organization via organizational frustration.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Coefficients Alpha, and Zero-order Correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Turnover	3.83	1.88	.97					
2. Political Behavior	2.96	1.25	.72	.94				
3. Frustration	4.57	1.47	.77	.71	.97			
4. Procedural Injustice	4.09	1.42	.80	.74	.78	.93		
5. Distributive Injustice	4.66	1.70	.79	.65	.78	.65	.98	
6. Interpersonal Injustice	3.63	1.62	.69	.69	.56	.67	.57	.96

N = 201; Diagonal entries in bold indicate coefficients alpha. All *r*s are significant at $p < .01$.

Table 2

Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses

Predictor variables	Criterion Variables					
	E1	E2	E3	E1	E2	E3
	OF	TI	TI	OF	PB	PB
	β	β	β	β	β	β
<i>Step 1. Control</i>						
Tenure	.03	-.08	-.08	.03	-.06	-.06
<i>Step 2 Predictors</i>						
Procedural Injustice	.48**	.41**	.36**	.48**	.39**	.28**
Interpersonal Injustice	-.04	.18**	.19**	-.04	.30**	.31**
Distributive Injustice	.49**	.42**	.37**	.49**	.23**	.12*
<i>Step 3 Mediator</i>						
Organizational Frustration	--	--	.11*	--	--	.22**
R^2	.74	.79	.79	.74	.64	.66

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; E = Equation; TI = Turnover Intentions; PB = Political Behavior; OF = Organizational Frustration; β = Standardized regression coefficients.

Figure Caption

Figure 1 The mediating impact of organizational frustration on the relationship of distributive injustice (1a) and procedural injustice (1b) with turnover intentions and political influence behavior. [The numbers below broken arrows represent standardized beta coefficients in Equation 1, numbers above solid arrows show standardized betas in Equation 2; numbers in bold above solid arrows show standardized beta coefficients based on regression equation including the mediator, Equation 3; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.]

