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# **THE APPARENT LOCUS OF MANAGERIAL DECISION MAKING AND PERCEPTIONS OF FAIRNESS IN PUBLIC PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Rules and processes, both formal and informal, characterize organizations (Simon & Barnard, 1976; Gouldner, 1954; March & Simon, 1958). Formal policies might codify existing rules or processes, or rules might exist as part of the informal organization system. Rules and processes might also differ in the costs of compliance—some requiring resources, such as time and effort, while others require minimal effort to comply with or enforce. Moreover, employees might see rules and processes as useful (DeHart-Davis, 2009)—or employees might see a rule as serving no functional purpose (Bozeman, 1993; Bozeman & Feeney, 2011; Kaufmann & Feeney, 2012). As DeHart-Davis, Davis, and Mohr (2015, p. 849) aptly observe, “Organizational rules are the backdrop of public employee life.”

One area, however, that remains underexplored in public management research is how the appearance of formal rules or policy as guiding personnel decisions affects employee perceptions of organizational decision outcomes. Does the apparent locus of decision making—the apparent source of a decision—affect the perceived fairness of organizational personnel decisions?

In the past decades, reforms to civil service systems in the United States have provided managers more flexibility in the day-to-day management of their organizations (Christensen & Lægreid, 2002; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Rubin & Kellough, 2012; Rubin, 2009; Condrey & Battaglio, 2007). Although policies continue to guide managerial actions as they relate to personnel decision making, traditional public personnel system rules and policies are

increasingly being questioned, undermined, and even eliminated (Condrey, 2002; Condrey & Battaglio, 2007; Kellough & Nigro, 2006b; 2002; 2006a). Understanding the importance for public managers to frame personnel decisions as guided by rules or policy is, thus, a timely and salient issue.

In addition, public management scholarship highlights the importance of employee perceptions of organizational fairness. For example, Hassan (2013, p. 539) observes that equitable and fair treatment of employees in public organizations has normative roots based on equal protection and constitutional principles and that fairness perceptions have substantive implications for the effectiveness and efficiency of public organizations. Indeed, public management scholars show how employees' perceptions of fairness affect a wide range of attitudes and behaviors, including job satisfaction and involvement, turnover, intrinsic motivation, relationships with managers, and misbehaviors (Rubin, 2011; Kim & Rubianty, 2011; Meng & Wu, 2012; Choi, 2011; Daley, 2007; Rubin, 2009; Ko & Hur, 2014; Cho & Sai, 2012; De Schrijver et al., 2010).

This article examines how the apparent locus of decision making affects the extent to which organizational personnel decisions are perceived as fair. In particular, we ask the following question: *Are personnel decisions framed as originating from a policy perceived as more or less fair than the identical personnel decision framed as made (a) by an individual supervisor or (b) by a supervisor along with a team of managers?* We examine this question using a randomized experimental survey design involving three stylized case vignettes. Each vignette describes a specific personnel situation and involves random assignment of the apparent locus of decision making (“policy,” “individual supervisor,” or “team of supervisors”).

The article proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the importance of perceptions of fairness to organizational outcomes. Second, we discuss three different loci of decision making and formulate hypotheses about how each might affect the extent that employees perceive outcomes as fair. Third, we present our data and research design. Fourth, we show the results of our analyses, i.e., how the apparent locus of decision making may affect the perceived fairness of a personnel decision outcome affecting an employee (while holding the decision outcome constant). Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the findings and implications for public management.

## **THE APPARENT LOCUS OF PERSONNEL DECISION MAKING AND PERCEPTIONS OF FAIRNESS**

Organizational justice research has long focused on the role of fairness in the workplace (Simons & Roberson, 2003). Research shows that higher levels of perceived fairness among employees is associated with higher levels of employee satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviors, job performance, and lower rates of absenteeism and dysfunctional work behavior (Colquitt et al., 2001; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002; Whitman et al., 2012; Greenberg, 2011).

In this article, we are interested in how the apparent locus of decision making affects the overall fairness of a personnel decision. In the context of public sector reforms aimed at giving managers more discretion in the day-to-day operation of the organizations (Kellough & Nigro, 2006b; 2002; Condrey, 2002; Condrey & Battaglio, 2007), we focus on the ways whereby the apparent locus of a personnel decision might affect how members of an organization assess the fairness of the outcome resulting from that decision. According to Leventhal (1980, p. 230),

“procedural fairness is a necessary precondition for the establishment and maintenance of distributive fairness.” Walker, Lind, & Thibaut (1979, p. 1416) argue “that ‘ends’ (distributive) cannot justify the ‘means’ (procedural), but that the ‘means’ can justify the ‘ends’ to the extent that...the perception of procedural justice partially determines the perception of distributive justice.” In other words, those who believe that the process underlying a decision is fair will also feel as though the outcome is fair. In the paper, we examine the fairness of decisions as appearing to come from one of the following three decision-making loci: (1) decisions framed as directly resulting from an organizational policy; (2) decisions framed as made by a single supervisor; and (3) decisions framed as made by a team of supervisors.

To answer how different decision-making loci may affect an individual’s assessment of the fairness of a personnel decision, we look to Leventhal’s (1980) six ‘justice rules.’ Leventhal’s (1980) six rules are: (1) Procedures should be consistent across persons and time (*consistency rule*); (2) Personal self-interest and blind allegiance to narrow preconceptions should be prevented (*bias-suppression rule*); (3) Allocative processes should rely on as much good information as possible (*accuracy rule*); (4) Opportunities to modify or reverse decisions must exist (*correctability rule*); (5) The allocative process must reflect the concerns and values of all stakeholders as much as possible (*representativeness rule*); and (6) Allocative procedures must be compatible with the moral and ethical values of the individual making the judgement (*ethicality rule*).

In public administration and management research, aspects of Levanthal's (1980) justice rules have been used to explain job performance and satisfaction (Choi, 2011), organizational commitment (Hassan & Rohrbaugh, 2011), organizational identification, job involvement, and turnover intention (Hassan, 2013), as well as in the evaluation of whether rules are effective

(Dehart-Davis, 2009). In the following section, we will discuss how the different loci of decision making may evoke either a sense of consistency or violation of these rules and, as a consequence, affect assessments of fairness in relation to outcomes.

### **Apparent Locus of Decision Making and Perceptions of Fairness**

We are interested in how the apparent locus of decision making affects an individual's perception of the decision outcome's overall fairness. As such, and as we elaborate later, we are not asking respondents about their own treatment. This is important to note since the literature shows that participation in decision processes and familiarity with a supervisor can increase an employee's perception of fairness of decision outcomes (e.g., performance evaluations) (see Greenberg 1986). However, employees encounter numerous decision processes in the workplace, many of which do not affect them directly. Understanding how employees respond to these decisions can offer insights into the ways that decisions may support or undermine employees' overall sense of organizational fairness in the workplace. In this section, we discuss the appearance of three different loci of decision making and formulate hypotheses related to their relative effects on perceptions of fairness.

#### **Individual Supervisor**

From the perspective of the Levanthal's justice rules, individuals might perceive a decision made at the discretion of one supervisor to potentially introduce the opportunity for the violation of the consistency rule (Rule 1) as well as introduce the opportunity for bias and, thus, violation of the rule of bias suppression (Rule 2). If decisions are made on the basis of a single supervisor's discretion, these decisions may be seen by those evaluating the decision as at risk of being unfair and inequitable; confounded by limitations in the supervisor's personal competencies or his or her subjective attitudes and perceptions.

When an employee is evaluating the fairness of a particular personnel decision that is made by a single supervisor, several factors may shape how that employee evaluates the fairness of the supervisor's decision, including past personnel decisions and evaluations of the supervisor's past actions. If we take account of all such personal factors that may bias an individual's perception of fairness in relation to a given personnel decision (i.e., which we accomplish per our experimental design), an individual may view a decision where the apparent locus of decision making lies with a single supervisor with more skepticism than if that decision was made based on other loci of decision-making (a team of supervisors; formal policy). Indeed, individuals may view decisions coming from a single supervisor as potentially marked by bias or subject to attitudes or opinions that will result in irregular or inconsistent outcomes. As such, when compared to the other loci of decision making tested in this study (a team of supervisors and an organizational policy), we believe that the framing of the loci of decision making as nested in a single supervisor will result in the lowest levels of perceived fairness.

Although the public management literature has not examined this exact notion in a personnel management or an experimental setting, the literature on street-level bureaucrats shows that the locus of administrative decision making can affect outcomes when the locus of the decision-making power is vested in a single individual. Findings suggest that such decisions are marked by bias and inconsistency, leading to inequitable or biased outcomes. Christensen, Szmer, & Stritch (2012) find that when discretion is used in assigning administrative workload, there is a systematic bias from assigning highly salient tasks to women and minority men judges. Researchers also find that bureaucrats responsible for administering social benefits give less financial benefits to women clients than automated systems (Wenger & Wilkins, 2009). While these examples suggest that individual discretion leads to biased outcomes compared to other

means of making decisions, no research has specifically looked at whether a decision made by a single-supervisor affects how individuals evaluate such decisions in terms of fairness.

### **Team of Supervisors**

A decision made by a single supervisor might not appear to be subject to the same level of rational thought and contemplation as a decision that appears to be made by a team of supervisors. When decision making is conducted by a group of supervisors, the decision outcome may appear to be the product of deliberation among members of management. Even when individuals do not themselves participate in a specific decision-making process, the appearance of a deliberative group process may affect how they perceive the fairness of the decision. The ability of a group to monitor the actions of individual management members and self-police against inherently biased outcomes or deviations from norms may lead to an increased sense that a team decision will not deviate from organizational norms and, thus, we might expect decisions flowing from a group to be perceived as less threatened by biases than those made by an individual.

As such, the appearance of a team of supervisors making a decision may, to an extent, be more consistent with bias suppression (Rule 2) than decisions appearing to be made by a single supervisor. Furthermore, if there is a rationale for deviation from previous decisions, the group process and participation of multiple individuals will help legitimize the need for a change from past precedent. The appearance of a deliberative process will increase the legitimacy of the decision and, thus, increase the perceived fairness of the decision relative to the same decision made by a single supervisor. We predict that an individual will perceive decisions made by a team of supervisors to be more fair than a decision made by a single supervisor. Thus, we test the following hypothesis:



*H1: A decision appearing to be made by a team of supervisors will be perceived as more fair than if the same decision appears to be made by a single supervisor.*

### **Organizational Policy**

Decisions stemming from clearly articulated organizational policies can invoke perceptions of equity and consistency in their application across members of an organization. According to Levanthal (1976, p. 40; cited in DeHart-Davis et al. 2015), "...consistency furthers procedural fairness by imparting advantage to no particular individual, yielding equality of opportunity for everyone and leveling the playing field." Decisions made consistent with a policy will invoke a greater sense of fairness with the outcome than decisions where there is the opportunity for individual consideration and discretion. In a management system where decisions are based on organization policies, policies can ensure equity among employees through consistent treatment (Rule 1) and can limit the introduction of individual (or group) biases into decision making (Rule 2). The public management literature offers examples of how formalization and routinization can restrict the occurrence of biases in the provision of social benefits (Wenger & Wilkins, 2009). Additionally, Christensen, Szmer, & Stritch, (2012) find that when administrative workload assignments are automatic, following a specified order according to policy, race and gender biases in the distribution of the work assignments do not exist. Indeed, organizational policies and formalization are often seen as mechanisms to limit discretion and suppress biases in administrative outcomes that result from human biases and heuristics in decision making.

Although we do not operationalize the consistency of the application of the rule, we believe individuals primed with a treatment suggesting a decision is made in "accordance with an organizational policy" are likely to assume a consistent application. Scholars have observed that of Levanthal's six principles (see discussion above), the consistency principle has one of the

greatest influences on individuals' perceptions of procedural justice and outcome fairness (Barrett-Howard & Tyler, 1986; Greenberg, 1986; see DeHart-Davis et al., 2015, p. 855). We test the following two hypotheses relative to the other two apparent loci of decision making:

*H2: A decision appearing to be made on the basis of an organizational policy will be perceived as more fair than if the same decision appears to be made by a single supervisor.*

*H3: A decision appearing to be made on the basis of an organizational policy will be perceived as more fair than if the same decision appears to be made by a team of managers.*

Our experimental operationalization of these processes represents a simplified version of how decision making occurs in real-life public organizations. Nevertheless, our study advances our understanding on how different decision processes may result in different evaluations of outcome fairness—in turn providing important insights into how individual perceptions of fairness can be affected by how decisions are framed and the role of policies as ensuring a sense of fairness and justice among individuals.

## **METHOD AND DATA**

### **Experimental Design**

Our sample consists of 1,090 adults, all residing in the U.S. and spanning a wide array of socioeconomic statuses. All of the 1,090 respondents were presented with three experimental case vignettes ( $C^{\text{support-1}}$ ,  $C^{\text{support-2}}$ , and  $C^{\text{sanction}}$ ) capturing situations of managerial decision making related to supporting and sanctioning an employee. We fixed the survey order of the vignettes, starting with  $C^{\text{support-1}}$  and ending with  $C^{\text{sanction}}$ .

C<sup>support-1</sup> and C<sup>support-2</sup> relate to situations of managerial support. In C<sup>support-1</sup>, an employee has a family situation and, therefore, asks permission to come in late to work. In C<sup>support-2</sup>, an employee asks for permission to leave work early because of a sick child. Finally, C<sup>sanction</sup> captures an example of managerial decision making when an employee was found to be lying on a resume.

For all three case vignettes, the respondents were randomly assigned to one of three experimental groups, henceforth referred to as T<sup>supervisor</sup>, T<sup>team</sup>, and T<sup>policy</sup>. Each vignette differed slightly in where the decisions appear to come from and originate—the *apparent locus of the decision making*. The respondents in T<sup>supervisor</sup> were told that the decision was made by the case employee's supervisor. In contrast, the decision was made by the employee's supervisor in conjunction with three other managers in T<sup>team</sup>—and based on organizational policy in T<sup>policy</sup>. Treatment assignments were fixed for each respondent, e.g., a respondent assigned to T<sup>supervisor</sup> was given this treatment in all three consecutive case vignettes.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

First, all respondents were provided a description of an employee, e.g., “John is an employee of a local government agency. John always shows up to the office on time; he completes all his work by assigned deadlines; he is very collegial toward his coworkers; he is responsive to citizens that contact him with questions. The following sections are going to ask you to read several short scenarios about John at work.” This employee description seeks to conjure the image of an employee exhibiting above-average work behavior and performance.

The subsequent survey screens contained the three case vignettes. Table 1 shows the three vignettes for each treatment group under each scenario and demonstrates equivalence across vignettes aside from the experimental variation in the apparent locus of decision making.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

We describe the name (and thus gender) of the employee to increase the contextual realism of the case vignettes. However, a respondent's perception of the fairness of a personnel decision could be affected by the gender of the employee. For example, social gender role and stereotype theory suggest that external decision making in relation to comparable employees of different genders may be associated with different perceptions of fairness (Basow, 1992; Eagly, 1995; Eagly & Wood, 1999). We therefore manipulate the name (and thus apparent gender) of the case employee within the three treatment groups in all three case vignettes: At random, some respondents received a male employee version of the case vignettes, while others received a female employee version, i.e., we substitute the name John with the name Rachel at random. Because we randomize the name of the case employee within each of the three experimental groups in all three vignettes, the stated gender of the case employee should not confound our results in any way. We show that the gender of the case employee is balanced across the three experimental groups. Moreover, our analyses include a "case employee name" dummy that accounts for bias caused by differences in the apparent gender of the employee. We selected the names John and Rachel based on Levitt & Dubner (2004).

Perception of fairness is the dependent variable in all three case vignettes. After presenting each case vignette, we asked the respondents to state their extent of disagreement or agreement on a six-point Likert-scale, anchored at one for "strongly disagree" and six for "strongly agree." The single-item was adapted from Gilliland's (1994), "I feel the hiring decision was fair"—an item adapted and used in contexts by other researchers (Thorsteinson & Ryan, 1997).

There are several reasons that we opted for the adapted version of the Gilliland (1994) item. First, the item asks about the fairness of the process generally—whereas other measures (such as Colquitt, 2001) ask items about different procedural justice rules. Given the general nature of the item and the level of abstraction with which each scenario is presented, the modified Gilliland item offers validity given the context of our vignettes and our experimental treatments.<sup>1</sup> Table 2 shows the individual items presented following each scenario and descriptive statistics.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

For the analyses, we operate with standardized item measures (mean = 0, standard deviation = 1). The estimated model coefficients can thus be interpreted in terms of standard deviations (e.g., a beta coefficient of .21 translates to an effect size of .21 of a standard deviation).

Because of the survey experimental design, any estimated differences in the perceptions of fairness across the three experimental groups are directly attributable to treatment variation of the described locus of decision making, i.e., manipulation as to whether the described case vignette decision was made by the case employees' immediate supervisor ( $T^{\text{supervisor}}$ ), a management team ( $T^{\text{team}}$ ), or based on organizational policy ( $T^{\text{policy}}$ ).

## **Participants**

We collected the data on the Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform in March 2015. MTurk is a common crowdsourcing platform that social scientists have turned to for collecting data and conducting experiments (Paolacci & Chandler 2014). Furthermore, public management researchers are increasingly using MTurk as a tool for conducting research experiments on citizen perceptions and attitudes (e.g., Jilke, Van Ryzin, & Van de Walle, 2016; Marvel, 2015,

2016; Pedersen, Stritch & Taggart 2017), and there is considerable potential to use such participant pools for gaining insights into the ways that public employees might respond to the actions of managers and the formal policies and rules of an organization (Landers & Behrend 2015; Stritch, Pedersen & Taggart 2017).

Given the diverse range of organizations, occupations, and functions engaged in the delivery of public services, we argue that conducting the study on the heterogeneous group of MTurk participants offers the potential for generalizability from experiments not found in traditional convenience samples, such as college students. Furthermore, the heterogeneity (geographically within the U.S., age, race, education, employment sector, occupation, job tenure, etc.) of the respondents is a subtle strength of this approach. For instance, the same experiment conducted on a group of employees nested in one public organization might yield results that are a function of that specific organization's management or employment practices. At the same time, we recognize that as a result of important institutional differences, public and private employees may differ in important and fundamental ways (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000; Bullock, Stritch, & Rainey 2015) which could affect the generalizability of our findings. We investigate the issue further in our analysis.

## **RESULTS**

For each case vignette, only the locus of decision making should differ systematically across the three groups. Table 3 shows the distribution of gender, race, education, employment status, employment sector, parents' education, annual household income, and general perceptions of trust<sup>2</sup>—for the full sample (column 1) and by experimental group (columns 2-4). Column “ $p > F$ ” shows the results of ANOVA tests for the difference in means across the three experimental groups.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

As Table 3 shows, we observe no significant differences in means across the three groups. The ANOVA tests suggest that the three experimental groups are balanced.<sup>2</sup> Bonferroni–Dunn tests (and two-sample *t*-tests) produce identical results. Importantly, the gender of the case employee appears balanced across the three experimental groups. This result supports that our manipulations of employee gender (name) in the cases are equally distributed—in turn supporting that variation in the gender of the case employee should not bias our results. Following successful randomization, the observed effect should be a result of the treatment condition as other unobserved and observed factors that could affect justice perceptions are randomized among the groups (Cook, Campbell, & Shadish 2002).

Table 4 shows the effect of treatments  $T^{\text{team}}$  and  $T^{\text{policy}}$  relative to  $T^{\text{supervisor}}$  (i.e., with the  $T^{\text{supervisor}}$  respondents as the reference category). For each case vignette, we regress two dummy variables (for  $T^{\text{team}}$  and for  $T^{\text{policy}}$ ) on the case-related indicator of fairness perception.<sup>3</sup> Models 1 through 3 show the results, respectively, for  $C^{\text{support-1}}$ ,  $C^{\text{support-2}}$ , and  $C^{\text{sanction}}$ . We estimate each model with and without the inclusion of the covariates listed in Table 2. We indicate the inclusion of the covariates with a “Yes” or “No”. Table row “( $T^{\text{policy}} \vee T^{\text{team}}$ )” shows the results of assigning  $T^{\text{team}}$  as the reference category instead of  $T^{\text{supervisor}}$ —and, thus, whether treatment  $T^{\text{policy}}$  has a significant effect relative to treatment  $T^{\text{team}}$ .

[Insert Table 4 about here]

For each case vignette, the estimates are similar in magnitude across models without and with covariates. In line with the balancing tests, this finding suggests that individual characteristics potentially affecting the respondents’ perceptions of fairness are equally distributed across the three experimental groups (Angrist & Pischke, 2009, p. 23-24).

We focus our discussion of the results from the models estimated with covariates. Figure 2 provides a graphical illustration of the results (with covariates). The X-axis denotes coefficient estimates, while the Y-axis marks treatments  $T^{\text{team}}$  and  $T^{\text{policy}}$ . The bullets and numerical figures reflect the beta coefficients for the two treatments ( $T^{\text{team}}$  and  $T^{\text{policy}}$ ) relative to  $T^{\text{supervisor}}$ . The horizontal lines signify 95 percent confidence intervals.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

The dependent variables are standardized, and the coefficients can be interpreted in terms of standard deviation changes (i.e., using  $C^{\text{sanction}}$  as an example,  $T^{\text{policy}}$  relative to  $T^{\text{supervisor}}$  results in an increase of .208 standard deviations in our measure of perceptions of fairness). As Figure 2 shows, the analyses reveal significant findings in relation to the two “support” vignettes. For  $C^{\text{support-1}}$ , we identify a positive effect of  $T^{\text{policy}}$  relative to  $T^{\text{team}}$  ( $\beta = .132$ , albeit at  $p = .08$ ). This result is consistent with H3 and the expectation that decisions consistent with the policy will invoke a greater sense of fairness than a decision made by a team of managers. While the coefficient of  $T^{\text{policy}}$  is in the expected direction relative to the  $T^{\text{supervisor}}$  according to H2, the results were not statistically significant.

For  $C^{\text{support-2}}$ , we identify a negative effect of  $T^{\text{team}}$  relative to  $T^{\text{supervisor}}$  ( $\beta = -.168$ )—or, put differently, a positive effect of  $T^{\text{supervisor}}$  relative to  $T^{\text{team}}$  ( $\beta = .168$ ). This finding runs contrary to H1, and the expectation that decisions made by a team of managers will be perceived as more fair than decisions made one single supervisor.

For the  $C^{\text{sanction}}$  vignette, the analyses show a positive effect of  $T^{\text{policy}}$  relative to  $T^{\text{supervisor}}$  ( $\beta = .208$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Thus, this finding provides some support for H2. While the effect of  $T^{\text{policy}}$  relative to  $T^{\text{team}}$  is in the direction hypothesized in H3, the finding is not statistically significant.



Similarly, while the coefficient of the  $T^{\text{supervisor}}$  treatment relative to  $T^{\text{team}}$  is in the hypothesized direction, the result is also not statistically significant.

### **Manipulation and Robustness Checks**

We use two manipulation checks to assess if our manipulation of the locus of decision making had the intended effect on the respondents—and to provide some evidence for the construct validity of the manipulation (Cozby, 2009).

First, at a later stage of the survey, we asked participants to recall the gender of the case employee (response options: “male,” “female,” and “do not remember”). 98 percent of the respondents reported the “correct” gender (a response corresponding to the gender of the case employee in the case vignettes they received). This result supports that the respondents actually read the survey text. Second, participants were also asked to recall the characteristics of the locus of decision making (response options: “supervisor,” “team of managers,” “organizational policy,” and “do not remember”). 83 percent reported a “correct” response. This result appears acceptable in light of the character of the manipulation check which arguably imposes a more difficult test. As a robustness test, we reran the model specifications in Table 4 on a subsample comprising the respondents with “correct” responses to both manipulation checks ( $n = 900$ ). This procedure did not qualitatively change the full-sample results.

As mentioned above, there is a considerable body of literature noting the fundamental differences between public sector and private sector institutions and the employees that work in them (e.g., Rainey and Bozeman 2000). Indeed, employees of these institutions may differ with respect to the motives they respond to when selecting into public or private sector work, but also in their attitudes as they are shaped by institutional forces over time (Rainey 2009; Bullock, Stritch & Rainey 2015). Institutional factors could shape how the respondents perceive and

interpret the vignettes. We, therefore, ran models with the inclusion of interaction term dummies (each treatment variable x public sector employment).

Overall, the results of the analyses are qualitatively similar to those presented in Table 4, and most of the interaction terms were not significant, indicating that the public sector responses did not vary widely from those of the other respondents. However, the analyses do reveal that in one of the vignettes ( $C^{\text{support-1}}$ ), the presence of a significant ( $T^{\text{team}}$ ) X (public sector employment) interaction term (although only marginally,  $p < .10$ ). The finding suggests that in this condition, public employees viewed the decision coming from a team of supervisors as less fair than their private sector counterparts. However, across the current public and private sector employees in our sample, we see that the public and private sector employees respond similarly to the treatments.<sup>4</sup>

[Insert Table 5]

### **Limitations**

This article's findings are marked by a relatively strong claim to internal validity, and two checks (manipulation and balance) provide support for the robustness of the results. Research design decisions, however, almost always involve tradeoffs. This study is no exception.

First, our study was conducted with MTurk participants—not a designated group of public employees. There is no replacement for high-quality field experiments (Bellé, 2013, 2014; Bellé & Cantarelli, 2015; Bellé, 2015). We do, however, believe that our approach is reasonable and can shed valuable insights for public administration and management research and theory. The heterogeneity (geographically within the U.S., age, race, education, etc.) of the respondents and the fact that most have had work experience, provides us a vehicle for examining valid responses to the phenomena of interest. Indeed, as we mention earlier, given the heterogeneity of

public organizations involved in public service delivery, we actually think that this is a subtle strength of the approach when considered. The results are not the function of one organizational environment. Similar to experimental public administration research that draws on student samples (e.g., Brewer & Brewer, 2011; Kaufmann & Feeney, 2014), researchers are beginning to consider the possibilities of using general population samples for examining questions about the motivation and behavior of public and private sector employees (Landers & Behrend 2015). When viewed as such, our research provides an important complement to existing correlational studies in public management research.

Second, real-world decision processes are complex, and decisions are not always independent of each other. For instance, the administration of a sanction to an employee would likely occur only following previous decisions applying graduated disciplinary actions. Indeed, decisions are fundamentally more complicated than we can replicate in stylized case vignettes. Furthermore, given the myriad of local, state, federal, and special purpose governments, the actual decision making processes that underlie personnel issues will differ from one public sector context to another. Indeed, in some places managers may have considerably more discretion than others (Condrey 2002). However, we suggest that our vignette approach provides some leverage for starting to illuminate the effects of different loci of decision making on an individual's perception of fairness in organizations. While beyond the scope of the current paper, future research may also consider how prior decisions condition the effects of subsequent decisions on employee perceptions of fairness, and we recognize that our results should be interpreted in the context of a fixed treatment allocation.

Finally, we examine how employees evaluate the fairness of personnel decisions affecting others. Indeed, we recognize that individuals may respond differently when they are

involved in—or the subject of—the decision (Greenberg 1986). While some decisions affect employees directly, however, many others do not. Understanding how people respond to decisions that they are not the subject of is also important in formulating our understanding of how the apparent locus of decision making affects perceptions of fairness in the workplace.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The results across our study were mixed. In vignette 1, an employee asks for a scheduling accommodation which is subsequently denied. We find some evidence that when the decision appears to originate from a team of supervisors it is seen as less fair than when the same decision is framed as originating from a policy ( $p < .10$ ). In vignette 2, the respondents were presented with a personal request to leave work early. In this scenario, we see that a decision appearing to come from a team of supervisors is seen as less fair than a decision appearing to come from the employee's individual manager ( $p < .05$ ). In this vignette, whether the decision appears to originate from a policy does not result in different perceptions of fairness than if the same decision appeared to come from an individual manager or a group of managers. Finally, in vignette 3, we present a decision to reduce an employee's pay in response to discovering that the employee misrepresented a credential. In this instance, a decision to sanction framed as originating directly from a policy is considered to be more fair than a decision originating from an individual manager.

This study makes several contributions to the current public administration and management literature on both organizational processes and perceptions of fairness. First, this study represents an important first step to understanding how differences in the apparent locus of decision making affect how individuals evaluate the fairness of outcomes affecting others in

organizations. The research is particularly important given recent reforms in public personnel management designed to decentralize decision making and give managers enhanced discretion in personnel management (Kellough & Nigro, 2002, 2006a; Condrey, 2002; Condrey & Battaglio, 2007). Indeed, while rules guide all personnel decision-making processes in public organizations, the apparent locus of the decision as interpreted by employees may affect the extent to which they judge the outcomes of such decisions as fair.

Second, while organizational fairness has received increasing interest in public management research, the inquiry has been largely reliant on cross-sectional, observational survey data (Rubin, 2011; Kim & Rubianty, 2011; Meng & Wu, 2012; Choi, 2011; Daley, 2007; Rubin, 2009; Ko & Hur, 2014; Cho & Sai, 2012; De Schrijver et al., 2010). This study takes constructs of interest—the locus of decision making and perceptions of fairness—and considers how they might be operationalized in an experimental study to advance and build on this important body of scholarship. We are by no means arguing that this approach should replace these studies. We are simply suggesting that experimental survey studies can serve as a complement to studies using cross-sectional data.

Third, the treatments—or loci of decision making—presented in the scenarios are of a low-intensity and at a high-level of abstraction for the participants. In other words, the treatment was subtle. If we had been able to embed participants more thoroughly in the design as witnesses to a decision in an actual workplace, we believe the effect sizes of the treatments might, in fact, be greater. The fact that simple changes in verbiage to indicate different loci of decision making can elicit significant differences concerning the perceived fairness of that decision is somewhat remarkable.

Finally, while we find limited support for our hypotheses, we believe that the results are interesting for several reasons, and point to directions for future research as it relates to the subject of a decision. The findings suggest that framing decisions to sanction an employee in response to employee misbehaviors as in accordance with organizational policies, generally, has a positive effect on the perception of fairness relative to other decision-making loci. While the situation is stylized and we acknowledge that real-world processes are inherently more complex, the findings do suggest that policies are important in legitimizing managerial actions related to employee discipline, and provide experimental evidence to complement observational work.

In contrast, when the employee made a last minute request to leave work early as a result of having a sick child, respondents thought that the decision to make the employee stay was more fair when it came from a single manager—relative to the team of managers or the organizational policy. In the context of decisions that might impede upon an employee’s ability to balance their work-life with their home-life, respondents might find an individual supervisor, with knowledge of the employee and their work habits, to be more capable of exercising discretion that results in a “fair” outcome. It could also be that, given the specific circumstances (a sick child), respondents might have been assessing the fairness of having such an organizational policy in the first place. Indeed, our contradictory findings suggest that formalized rules and policies are more effective in ensuring fairness when dealing with aspects of behavioral misconduct than in situations when they guide decisions responding to highly personalized employee issues.

## NOTES

1. The decision to use a single-item measure does come with considerable tradeoffs. Single-item measures can be weak in terms of reliability and multi-item scales are usually preferable for minimizing measurement error.
2. We measure general perceptions of trust using two binary items from the General Social Surveys. Table 3 refers to these items as TRUST and HELPFUL. We measure general perceptions of trust in others and the helpfulness of others using two binary items from the General Social Surveys. TRUST is an individual's binary response to the question, "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?", where a "1" indicates agreeing people can be trusted. HELPFUL is an individual's binary response to the question, "Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?", where a 1 indicates agreement that people try to be helpful.
3. While OLS regression assumes that the disturbances in the data are normally distributed, our dependent variables have discrete values (six-point Likert scale). As a robustness test, we, therefore, generated a set of binary dependent variables (cut at the mean) and ran models 1B, 2B, and 3B using a logit estimator. The results are qualitatively similar to those in Table 4.
4. Following the suggestion of a thoughtful reviewer, we tested whether the gender of the employee in the vignette, the gender of the respondent, or the interaction among the two moderated the effects of treatment. We did not find any evidence of a moderation. At the same time, we do not make too much of the non-finding as we did not design the original study with the statistical power necessary for this secondary analysis in mind.

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**Table 1.** Sample Case Vignette Language

| Experiment             | Treatment               | Vignette Text   |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| C <sup>support-1</sup> | T <sup>supervisor</sup> | [John/Rachel] has a family situation that requires [him/her] to ask [his/her] supervisor if it is okay that [he/she] comes in an hour late to work, so long as [he/she] stays an hour late at work in the following week. <u>[His/Her] supervisor makes the decision that it is not okay for [John/Rachel] to come to work late.</u>  |
|                        | T <sup>team</sup>       | [John/Rachel] has a family situation that requires [him/her] to ask [his/her] supervisor if it is okay that [he/she] comes in an hour late to work, so long as [he/she] stays an hour late at work in the following week. <u>[His/Her] immediate supervisor along with three other managers in the organization together make the decision that it is not okay for [John/Rachel] to come to work late.</u>  |
|                        | T <sup>policy</sup>     | [John/Rachel] has a family situation that requires [him/her] to ask [his/her] supervisor if it is okay that [he/she] comes in an hour late to work, so long as [he/she] stays an hour late at work in the following week. <u>In accordance with the organization's policy, [his/her] supervisor makes the decision that it is not okay for [John/Rachel] to come to work late.</u>  |
| C <sup>support-2</sup> | T <sup>supervisor</sup> | [John's/Rachel's] young son is sick and [he/she] asks [his/her] supervisor if it is okay that [he/she] leaves work early even though [he/she] is supposed to give a presentation to [his/her] co-workers in about an hour. <u>[His/Her] supervisor makes the decision that it is not okay for [John/Rachel] to leave work early since [he/she] is needed to give the presentation.</u>  |
|                        | T <sup>team</sup>       | [John's/Rachel's] young son is sick and [he/she] asks [his/her] supervisor if it is okay that [he/she] leaves work early even though [he/she] is supposed to give a presentation to [his/her] co-workers in about an hour. <u>[His/Her] immediate supervisor along with three other managers in the organization make the decision that it is not okay for [John/Rachel] to leave work early since [he/she] is needed to give the presentation.</u>   |
|                        | T <sup>policy</sup>     | [John's/Rachel's] young son is sick and [he/she] asks [his/her] supervisor if it is okay that [he/she] leaves work early even though [he/she] is supposed to give a presentation to [his/her] co-workers in about an hour. <u>In accordance with the organization's policy, [his/her] supervisor makes the decision that it is not okay for [John/Rachel] to leave work early since [he/she] is needed to give the presentation.</u>  |
| C <sup>sanction</sup>  | T <sup>supervisor</sup> | A discrepancy was recently discovered on [John's/Rachel's] resume. It appears that [he/she] might have misrepresented having a certification that [he/she] does not, in fact, have. When asked by [his/her] supervisor, [he/she] admitted to slightly embellishing this one aspect of the resume. <u>[His/her] supervisor makes the decision that [John/Rachel] will receive a reduction in salary of approximately 8 percent, but will maintain [his/her] current position and responsibilities. After this sanction, the matter is considered closed.</u>   |
|                        | T <sup>team</sup>       | A discrepancy was recently discovered on [John's/Rachel's] resume. It appears that [he/she] might have misrepresented having a certification that [he/she] does not, in fact, have. When asked by [his/her] supervisor, [he/she] admitted to slightly embellishing this one aspect of the resume. <u>[His/Her] immediate supervisor along with three other managers in the organization make the decision that John will receive a reduction in salary of approximately 8 percent, but will maintain [his/her] current position and responsibilities. After this sanction, the matter is considered closed.</u> |
|                        | T <sup>policy</sup>     | A discrepancy was recently discovered on [John's/Rachel's] resume. It appears that [he/she] might have misrepresented having a certification that [he/she] does not, in fact, have. When asked by [his/her] supervisor, [he/she] admitted to slightly embellishing this one aspect of the resume. <u>In accordance with the organization's policy, [his/her] supervisor makes the decision that John will receive a reduction in salary of approximately 8 percent, but will maintain [his/her] current position and responsibilities. After this sanction, the matter is considered closed.</u>                |

**Table 2.** Fairness Items and Descriptive Statistics

|  | Mean  | S.D.  | Min | Max |
|--|-------|-------|-----|-----|
| C <sup>support-1</sup> : “Generally, I think this decision seems fair”     | 2.535 | 1.371 | 1   | 6   |
| C <sup>support-2</sup> : ”Generally, I think this decision seems fair”     | 2.953 | 1.279 | 1   | 6   |
| C <sup>sanction</sup> : “Generally, the decision that was made seems fair” | 3.893 | 1.237 | 1   | 6   |

*Notes: n = 1,090.*

**Table 3.** Sample Characteristics, Full Sample and by Experiment Groups (Mean and Standard Deviation)

|                                       | Full Sample | T <sup>supervisor</sup> | T <sup>team</sup> | T <sup>policy</sup> | <i>p</i> > F |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------|
|                                       | (1)         | (2)                     | (3)               | (4)                 |              |
| Female                                | .58 (.49)   | .60 (.49)               | .56 (.50)         | .57 (.50)           | .47          |
| Race:                                 |             |                         |                   |                     |              |
| White                                 | .78 (.42)   | .77 (.42)               | .76 (.43)         | .79 (.41)           | .54          |
| Black                                 | .10 (.29)   | .09 (.29)               | .12 (.32)         | .08 (.27)           | .25          |
| Hispanic                              | .05 (.22)   | .04 (.19)               | .05 (.22)         | .05 (.23)           | .49          |
| Asian                                 | .04 (.20)   | .05 (.21)               | .04 (.20)         | .04 (.19)           | .86          |
| Other                                 | .04 (.19)   | .05 (.23)               | .03 (.17)         | .03 (.18)           | .21          |
| Education:                            |             |                         |                   |                     |              |
| Some high school                      | .01 (.09)   | .01 (.12)               | .01 (.08)         | .01 (.08)           | .39          |
| High school                           | .10 (.29)   | .07 (.26)               | .11 (.31)         | .11 (.31)           | .12          |
| Some coll.                            | .28 (.45)   | .29 (.46)               | .28 (.45)         | .27 (.44)           | .77          |
| Undergraduate degree                  | .43 (.50)   | .40 (.49)               | .44 (.50)         | .44 (.50)           | .48          |
| Some grad.                            | .05 (.23)   | .06 (.24)               | .04 (.20)         | .06 (.24)           | .51          |
| Postgraduate degree                   | .13 (.34)   | .16 (.37)               | .12 (.32)         | .11 (.32)           | .15          |
| Employment status:                    |             |                         |                   |                     |              |
| Student                               | .06 (.24)   | .06 (.24)               | .05 (.23)         | .07 (.25)           | .81          |
| Unemployed                            | .14 (.34)   | .13 (.33)               | .15 (.36)         | .13 (.34)           | .63          |
| Employed, org.                        | .64 (.48)   | .64 (.48)               | .63 (.48)         | .65 (.48)           | .88          |
| Employed, self                        | .13 (.34)   | .14 (.35)               | .13 (.34)         | .13 (.33)           | .78          |
| Other                                 | .03 (.16)   | .03 (.17)               | .03 (.17)         | .02 (.15)           | .91          |
| Sector of employment                  |             |                         |                   |                     |              |
| Private                               | .69 (.46)   | .68 (.47)               | .70 (.46)         | .70 (.46)           | .76          |
| Public                                | .18 (.39)   | .19 (.39)               | .16 (.37)         | .19 (.39)           | .51          |
| Non profit                            | .08 (.27)   | .09 (.29)               | .09 (.28)         | .06 (.24)           | .36          |
| Never had a job                       | .05 (.22)   | .04 (.20)               | .06 (.23)         | .05 (.21)           | .67          |
| Mom, education (undergrad. or higher) | .44 (.50)   | .44 (.50)               | .45 (.50)         | .42 (.49)           | .69          |
| Dad, education (undergrad. or higher) | .41 (.49)   | .40 (.49)               | .43 (.50)         | .41 (.49)           | .70          |
| Annual income (household):            |             |                         |                   |                     |              |
| <\$30,000                             | .28 (.45)   | .28 (.45)               | .26 (.44)         | .29 (.45)           | .75          |
| \$30,000-\$59,999                     | .36 (.48)   | .34 (.47)               | .38 (.49)         | .37 (.48)           | .46          |
| \$60,000-\$89,000                     | .18 (.39)   | .19 (.39)               | .18 (.38)         | .19 (.39)           | .88          |
| \$90,000+                             | .17 (.38)   | .19 (.40)               | .18 (.38)         | .15 (.36)           | .33          |
| TRUST                                 | .47 (.50)   | .46 (.50)               | .47 (.50)         | .50 (.50)           | .52          |
| HELPFUL                               | .59 (.49)   | .57 (.50)               | .56 (.50)         | .62 (.49)           | .20          |
| Case employee name, female            | .51 (.50)   | .49 (.50)               | .53 (.50)         | .52 (.50)           | .50          |
| <i>N</i>                              | 1,090       | 371                     | 352               | 367                 |              |

**Table 4.** Effects of Treatments on Perception of Fairness. Ordinary Least Squares Regression. Beta Coefficients and Robust Standard Errors (in Parentheses)

|  | C <sup>support-1</sup> |                 | C <sup>support-2</sup> |                  | C <sup>sanction</sup> |                  |
|--|------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| T <sup>team</sup>                          | .000<br>(.075)         | -.031<br>(.075) | -.153*<br>(.075)       | -.168*<br>(.076) | .086<br>(.076)        | .090<br>(.076)   |
| T <sup>policy</sup>                        | .107<br>(.071)         | .102<br>(.071)  | -.100<br>(.073)        | -.102<br>(.073)  | .201**<br>(.071)      | .208**<br>(.072) |
| (T <sup>policy</sup> v T <sup>team</sup> ) | .106<br>(.076)         | .132†<br>(.077) | .053<br>(.075)         | .066<br>(.076)   | .105<br>(.075)        | .118<br>(.076)   |
| Covariates                                 | No                     | Yes             | No                     | Yes              | No                    | Yes              |
| N  | 1,090                  | 1,090           | 1,090                  | 1,090            | 1,090                 | 1,090            |

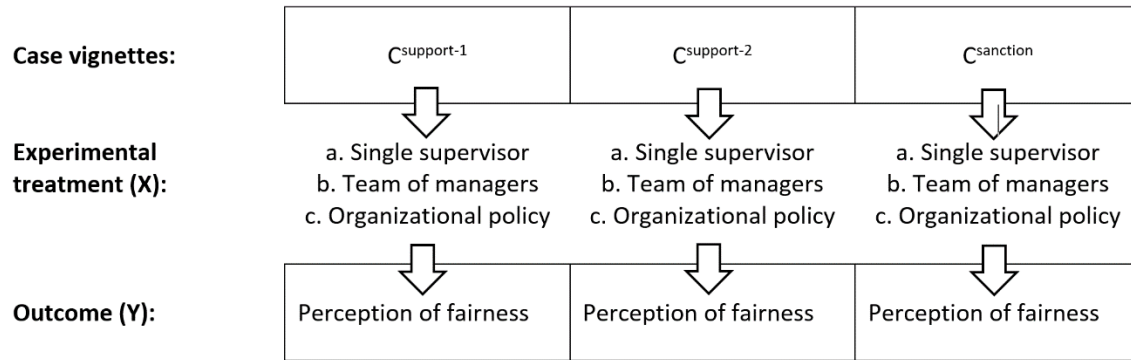
Notes: † < .1; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01. For brevity, the covariates' coefficients are not reported. The full models are available from the authors upon request. The reference (or omitted) groups in the models containing additional covariates were Tsupervisor, male, white, some college education, employed in an organization, private sector, annual income \$30,000-\$59,999.

**Table 5.** Effects of Treatments on Perception of Fairness for Public Employees. Ordinary Least Squares Regression. Beta Coefficients and Robust Standard Errors (in Parentheses)

|                                   | C <sup>support-1</sup> |                 | C <sup>support-2</sup> |                  | C <sup>sanction</sup> |                  |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| T <sup>team</sup>                 | .060 (.083)            | .020<br>(.083)  | -.145†<br>(.082)       | -.165*<br>(.084) | .115<br>(.084)        | .102<br>(.085)   |
| T <sup>policy</sup>               | .097 (.078)            | .086<br>(.077)  | -.126<br>(.079)        | -.133†<br>(.079) | .213**<br>(.080)      | .221**<br>(.081) |
| Public Employee                   | .109 (.134)            | .128<br>(.133)  | .011<br>(.141)         | .003 (.139)      | .060<br>(.125)        | .048<br>(.129)   |
| T <sup>team</sup> x Public Emp.   | -.348†<br>(.192)       | -.303<br>(.191) | -.047<br>(.193)        | -.026<br>(.193)  | -.106<br>(.197)       | -.067<br>(.200)  |
| T <sup>policy</sup> x Public Emp. | .055 (.192)            | .078<br>(.193)  | .138<br>(.201)         | .156 (.203)      | -.065<br>(.174)       | -.063<br>(.179)  |
| Covariates                        | No                     | Yes             | No                     | Yes              | No                    | Yes              |
| N                                 | 1,090                  | 1,090           | 1,090                  | 1,090            | 1,090                 | 1,090            |

Notes: † < .1; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01. For brevity, the covariates' coefficients are not reported. The full models are available from the authors upon request. The reference (or omitted) groups in the models containing additional covariates were Tsupervisor, male, white, some college education, employed in an organization, private sector, annual income \$30,000-\$59,999.

**Figure 1. Research Design**



**Figure 2. Plot of Effects of Treatments on Perception of Fairness Relative to Baseline (Individual Manager)**

