

Perception of (In)Justice, Engagement, and Counterproductive Behavior in the Academic Environment: The Mediating Role of Emotions

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Abstract

The perception of (in)justice has become the subject of considerable scientific interest in the field of organizational psychology. In the academic environment, research has so far shown that the perception of justice is positively correlated with motivation and negatively correlated with anger and aggressive behavior toward teachers. However, less is known about the mechanisms of the various aspects of justice in an academic setting. The aim of this research was to provide a better understanding of justice perception in an academic context by (1) examining its connection to engagement and counterproductive behavior, and (2) viewing emotions as mediators of these relationships. A total of 426 students completed an online questionnaire comprising Teachers' and Peers' Fairness Scale, Affective Well-Being Scale for Students, Work Engagement Scale for Student Population, and Counterproductive Work Behavior Questionnaire for Student Population. Data analysis indicated a positive relationship between four dimensions of justice perception and engagement. Measures of counterproductive behavior showed a distinct pattern of connections with justice perception dimensions: only colleagues' interactional justice was negatively correlated to interpersonal deviance, while teachers' procedural and interactional fairness were negatively related to organizational deviance. Pleasant emotions accounted for a significant portion of variance in engagement across all dimensions of justice and mediated their relationships to engagement. Pleasant and unpleasant emotions did not show a unique contribution in predicting the dimension of counterproductive behavior above fairness. The results confirm the relevance of justice perceptions in the academic environment and provide guidelines for creating the environment conducive to fostering pleasant emotions and enhancing students' engagement.

Keywords: perception of justice, academic fairness perception, emotions, engagement, counterproductive behavior, students

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Introduction

It is a natural phenomenon that people want to be treated fairly in all domains of their lives (Kit, 2017). It is not surprising that the perception of (in)justice has attracted considerable scientific attention across various areas of social disciplines. In the 1960s, researchers primarily studied distributive justice (Greenberg, 1987), which is defined as the perception of an equitable allocation of outcomes (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Such conceptualization was based on the Social Exchange Model (Blau, 1964), suggesting that individuals draw conclusions about the fairness of outcomes by comparing the ratio of their own investments and gains to the ratios of investments and gains of others. However, studies have shown that assessments people make about their own outcomes are often biased. Thus, in the 1970s, researchers affirmed the importance of procedural justice (Greenberg, 1987) which refers to the fairness of the procedures used to make decisions about the outcomes (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Bies and Moag (1986) elaborated the concept of interactional justice, defining it as the quality of interpersonal relationships during the implementation and enforcement of rules and procedures. This type of justice represents the extent to which people feel they are treated with respect and dignity (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Greenberg (1993) further made distinction between informational and interpersonal justice, where the former refers to the clear explanation of procedures and outcomes, and the latter refers to the relationship of authority to people during the implementation of procedures.

The concept of distributive justice in the academic context can easily be reflected in the grades, as they are the most prominent outcome for students (Chory et al., 2017; Horan et al., 2010). Procedural fairness is manifested in the formation of criteria for grades and is shown to be particularly important (Horan et al., 2010). Namely, at the beginning of the academic year, students expect to receive specific guidelines regarding their obligations and how their work will be graded (Chory, 2007; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a; Horan et al. 2010). The attitude and the approach of professors towards students is also important (Chory-Assad, 2002; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004b) and is reflected in the concept of interactional justice (Horan et al. 2010; Chory et al. 2017). The perception of (un)fair interactions can also be present in relationships with colleagues (Cropanzano et al., 2011; Kit, 2017; Zaluški, 2016). The perception of peer interactional justice in the academic context refers to how students perceive fairness, respect, and appropriate treatment during their interactions with peers, both in academic and social situations.

This study employs Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Control-Value Theory (CVT; Pekrun, 2006) to provide a theoretical basis for understanding these relationships. SDT posits that justice perceptions satisfy basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn increase motivation and engagement. For example, fair treatment by professors and

peers can foster a sense of belonging and competence, leading to higher academic engagement (Molinari & Mameli, 2018).

On the other hand, CVT explains how emotions arise in response to justice perceptions and influence academic outcomes. According to CVT, emotions such as anger and frustration may arise when students perceive outcomes as highly valued but uncontrollable (Pekrun, 2006). These emotional reactions can mediate the relationship between perceived (in)justice and behavioral outcomes, such as engagement or counterproductive behavior.

Given that engagement in educational settings is often conceptualized as a multidimensional construct (Fredricks et al., 2004) that encompasses behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects, this study adopts a simplified, one-dimensional approach. This choice aligns with the study's focus on examining the affective mediation of justice perceptions and streamlines the analysis of these relationships.

Research into peer interactional justice is relatively less explored than teacher-student justice, but there is a growing interest in understanding how students' perceptions of fairness in peer interactions affect their academic outcomes, behavior, and psychological well-being. Cropanzano et al. (2011) found that teams of students who perceive more mutual fairness exhibit better team communication, coordination and contribution, leading to better collective performance. In addition, peer interpersonal justice led to more pronounced team citizenship behavior via the process of interpersonal teamwork indicated by team cohesion, effort and support. Even though they did not directly measure peer interpersonal justice, we can consider several studies that have investigated the impact of students' perceived peer support. Specifically, students' supportive peer relationships were positively related to students' higher resilience and academic achievement (Hoferichter et al., 2022) as well as psychological well-being (Hoferichter et al., 2021), and negatively related to somatic health complaints (Sonmark & Modin, 2016) and burnout (Hoferichter et al., 2023). Hence, we can conclude that an environment where there is mutual respect and fairness among students is associated with lower stress levels and better well-being, while injustice and exclusion can contribute to problems such as burnout.

With the aim of exploring justice in an organizational/academic environment, researchers have mostly been using the Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Rupp, 2008). This multidisciplinary paradigm suggests that interpersonal exchanges of various resources are governed by rules, compliance with which leads to high-quality and enduring relationships (Colquitt et al., 2013). Thus, if students perceive that they are treated fairly by employers/faculty and superiors/professors, they will feel the need to respond positively to such conditions (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2013). It is interesting to note that researchers began to associate fairness with high levels of motivation (Chory-Assad, 2002) and work engagement, both in the sample of employees (Agarwal, 2014; Li, 2012; Özer et al., 2017; Saks, 2006) and students (Kit, 2017; Molinari & Mameli, 2018; Zaluški, 2016). Unfair treatment is associated with a greater propensity for

counterproductive work behaviors (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2013; Fox et al., 2001) as well as aggression and other negative emotional and behavioral responses in students (Chory et al., 2017; Chory & Paulsel, 2004a, 2004b; Chory-Assad, 2002).

While the Social Exchange paradigm is adequate for this field of study, it is mainly limited to cognitive explanations (Colquitt et al., 2013). As employees/students experience emotional reactions in response to (un)fair treatment (Adams, 1965; Fox et al., 2001; Spector & Fox, 2002), it seems that theoretical frameworks based on affect could both complement and extend this understanding (Colquitt et al., 2013). While studying the importance of emotions in the academic environment, Chory et al. (2014) relied upon the Theory of Emotional Reactions (Mottet et al., 2006) and emphasized that the professor's communication pattern can evoke different emotions in students, leading to various behavioral responses. Namely, a positive approach to students will result in complementary emotions that favor outcomes such as motivation to learn (Chory et al., 2017). This was confirmed in a study by Molineri and Mameli (2018) on high-school students, which found that justice should be considered a basic need in school settings, as it promotes student motivation and engagement. On the other hand, unfair treatment can evoke intense emotions such as anger, frustration and hurt (Chory et al., 2014, 2017; Horan et al., 2010). Such emotions can manifest themselves in indirect aggression, which students often display as a coping mechanism for undesirable conditions (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a, 2004b). A recent longitudinal study on high-school students (Mameli et al., 2021) confirmed that the perception of justice is important to the point that its deficiency triggers a persistent feeling of anger.

Since research on the possible mediating role of emotions in the relationship between perceptions of justice and relevant criteria in an academic context has been scarce, the aim of this study was to expand the knowledge about the nature of these relationships and to provide guidelines for future research on the perception of justice. For this purpose, we have chosen criteria that are frequently used in both professional and academic contexts, i. e., student engagement as a desirable outcome and counterproductive academic behavior as undesirable. Work engagement is originally defined as a positive and fulfilling motivational state related to work (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Even though recent literature in the academic setting has typically examined engagement as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012), we adopted the traditional one-dimensional construct of engagement, to clearly test the assumed affective mediation. On the other hand, we opted for the two-dimensional model of counterproductive academic behavior (Tomšić et al., 2014) because organizational and interpersonal deviance may be differently related to various aspects of justice perception. The former includes behaviors such as unjustified absences from class and delays in submitting assignments, while the latter

includes damaging others' belongings, making jokes about colleagues' private lives, and similar actions (Tomšić et al., 2014).

Emotions are at the core of human experience (Jenkins & Oatley, 2003), serve as key drivers of our actions (Lazarus, 1991), and play a significant role in our thoughts (Chuang, 2007). According to the Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2004), pleasant emotions encourage an active approach to work and enable individuals to develop both personally and professionally. Unpleasant emotions, on the other hand, arise due to unfavorable situations in the academic and professional environments (Chory et al., 2014; Horan et al., 2010; Schaufeli & van Rhenen, 2006; Van Katwyk et al., 2000). Both pleasant and unpleasant emotions are experienced daily, triggered by events and interactions that students and employees are exposed to, and are accompanied by various desirable and undesirable outcomes (Chory et al., 2017; Schaufeli & van Rhenen, 2006; Spector & Fox, 2005).

Aim and Problems

The main aim of this research was to examine the relationships between four dimensions of justice perception—distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice of professors, and interactional justice of colleagues with engagement and different forms of counterproductive work behaviors in student population, and to analyze whether such connections could be explained by the mechanism that is affective in its nature.

The research problems and hypotheses are as follows:

- (1) To examine the relationship between professors' and colleagues' perceptions of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice and engagement and organizational and interpersonal deviance in the student population.

Hypothesis 1: Perceptions of distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice of professors and interactional justice of colleagues will be positively related to student engagement and negatively related to organizational and interpersonal deviance. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), fair treatment satisfies students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which increases their motivation and engagement. Conversely, perceived injustice can lead to frustration and anger, which are associated with counterproductive behaviors (Chory et al., 2017).

- (2) To examine the mediating role of pleasant and unpleasant emotions in the relationship between four dimensions of justice perception and outcomes (engagement, organizational and interpersonal deviance) in student population

Hypothesis 2: Pleasant and unpleasant emotions will make a unique contribution to the explanation of engagement, organizational and interpersonal deviance above four dimensions of justice perception. Based on Control-Value Theory (Pekrun, 2006), emotions play a crucial role in shaping academic outcomes. Positive emotions, such as satisfaction, can increase engagement, while negative emotions, such as anger, can contribute to deviant behaviors. These emotional responses go beyond the direct effect of justice perceptions, influencing how students engage and behave.

Hypothesis 3: Pleasant and unpleasant emotions will mediate the relationships between justice (distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice of professors, and interactional justice of colleagues) and engagement, organizational deviance, and interpersonal deviance. Previous research (Chory et al., 2017) suggests that emotions act as a bridge between perceived unfairness and behavioral outcomes. When students experience unfair treatment, it can trigger unpleasant emotions such as frustration, which may lead to counterproductive behavior. Conversely, fair treatment can foster pleasant emotions that promote greater engagement.

Method

Students from various disciplines and years of study took part in this study. A total of 426 students from the University of Zagreb participated, of which 321 were female and 105 male. All students were enrolled in public faculties, with the majority attending the Faculty of Croatian Studies and the Faculty of Architecture. Their ages ranged from 19 to 36 years, with an $M = 22.04$ years and $SD = 2.25$ years. The highest participation was among second ($n = 104$) and third year ($n = 92$) undergraduate students.

Instruments

The *Teachers' and Peers' Fairness scale* (Kit, 2017) was used to measure the experience of (un)fairness in the study. The items in this instrument were adapted from previously developed questionnaires focused on organizational (in)justice and were specifically tailored to an academic context. It measures the distributive fairness of professors ("My professors give me grades I deserve"), the procedural fairness of professors ("My professors inform me in a timely manner about the pre-defined criteria for evaluating and evaluating students' work"), the interactional fairness of professors ("My professors take my feelings into account") and the interactional fairness of colleagues ("My classmates accept me"). Each subscale comprises three items, making a total of twelve items in the entire questionnaire. The degree of agreement is expressed on a five-point scale from 1 = *I do not agree at all* to 5 = *I completely agree*, whereby the composite results are determined as the average

values of the assessments. Higher scores indicate a stronger perception of justice, and vice versa. The composite scores for the subscales were calculated as the mean values of all items within that dimension. In this study the internal consistency is .81 for distributive fairness of professors, .84 for procedural fairness of professors, .87 for interactional fairness of professors, and .87 for interactional fairness of colleagues.

Pleasant and unpleasant emotions in the academic environment were measured with the *Job-related Affective Well-being Scale* (JAWS; Van Katwyk et al., 2000), which was adapted for the student population. The Croatian version of the JAWS has been previously applied in research and has demonstrated good psychometric properties (Vranić et al., 2018). The questionnaire consists of 20 items, 10 for measuring unpleasant emotions (e.g., “I feel anxious because of the faculty”) and 10 for pleasant emotions (e.g., “I feel fulfilled because of the faculty”). Participants rate on a five-point scale how often they have experienced a particular emotion in the last 30 days, with 1 being *never* and 5 being *very often*. The internal consistency in this study is .89 for the subscale of pleasant emotions, .93 for the subscale of unpleasant emotions and .70 for the total score.

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli et al., 2002) was used to assess student engagement. The Croatian version of the scale has been used in previous research and demonstrated good psychometric properties (Černja Rajter et al., 2019). The scale consists of 17 items that measure three core dimensions of engagement: vigor, dedication, and absorption. For the purposes of this study, the items were adapted to the student context, with examples such as “While fulfilling my academic obligations, I feel like I’m bursting with energy”, “I don’t give up on academic responsibilities even when things are not going well”, and “While fulfilling my academic obligations, I forget about everything else around me.” Participants rated the frequency of these experiences on a seven-point scale ranging from 0 = *never* to 6 = *every day*. Given the reported intercorrelations between the subscales (Schaufeli et al., 2002), the calculation of a composite score reflecting overall engagement is considered appropriate. In previous research (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), the internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) of the overall scale typically ranged from .80 to .90, while in the present study, it was found to be .95.

Counterproductive behavior was measured with the *Counterproductive Work Behavior Questionnaire for the Student Population* (Tomšić et al., 2014). The questionnaire consists of 18 items that measure organizational ($k = 9$) and interpersonal ($k = 9$) deviance. The correlation between the subscales is $r = .57$, which justifies the calculation of a composite score. Participants are asked to assess the frequency of certain undesirable behaviors in the academic environment on a 5-point scale from 1 = *never* to 5 = *every week* (e.g., “How often were you late for a seminar or some other assignment at the university?”; “How often have you made jokes about a colleague’s private life?”), whereby the composite results are determined as the average values. The internal consistency is .76 for the entire questionnaire, .72 for the organizational deviance subscale and .69 for the interpersonal subscale.

Procedure

The study was conducted online using a questionnaire distributed via the Google Forms platform and disseminated various student groups via social media and email. In the introductory instructions, participants were informed that the study aimed to examine perceptions of the academic environment. They were also provided with an estimate of the average time required to complete the questionnaire and were assured that the data would be analyzed at the group level and used for research purposes only. Given the sensitivity of certain variables, participants were guaranteed the confidentiality of their responses and were informed that their participation was anonymous and voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time without consequences.

For data analysis, we employed correlation and regression analyses due to their suitability for examining the relationships between justice perceptions, engagement, and counterproductive behaviors. While more sophisticated techniques such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) could be used, we opted for simpler analyses based on the research objectives, the nature of the data, and the exploratory focus of our study.

Results

The results indicate that the distributions for distributive justice, procedural justice of professors, and interactional justice of colleagues are skewed towards higher values, with the exception of interactional justice of professors, which shows a positive skew. Additionally, the distributions for organizational and interpersonal deviance are positively skewed, indicating that such behaviors are rarely exhibited by participants (Table 1)

Table 1

Descriptive Data

	Min.	Max.	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>K-S</i>	<i>Sk_z</i>
Distributive justice of professors	1.00	5.00	3.63	0.87	0.13**	-4.34
Procedural justice of professors	1.00	5.00	3.49	1.00	0.11**	-3.38
Interactional justice of professors	1.00	5.00	2.49	1.01	0.10**	3.70
Interactional justice of colleagues	1.00	5.00	4.34	0.72	0.21**	-9.74
Pleasant emotions	10.00	50.00	30.30	7.89	0.05*	0.81
Unpleasant emotions	10.00	50.00	29.72	8.29	0.06*	2.36
Organizational deviance	1.00	4.56	2.27	0.63	0.08**	2.94
Interpersonal deviance	1.00	3.50	1.35	0.39	0.19**	16.21
Engagement	0.00	98.00	53.37	22.57	0.06**	-2.26

Note. K-S – Kolmogorov-Smirnov test; Sk – skewness Z statistic.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The correlations between the constructs are presented in Table 2. As expected, participants who perceived that they were treated fairly by their professors mostly reported higher levels of pleasant emotions during their studies. The interactional justice of professors was shown to be most significantly associated with positive emotions, while procedural justice was negatively associated with unpleasant emotion to a slightly greater extent than the other dimensions. The correlations between justice dimensions and counterproductive behavior were found to be either significant and low or non-significant. More specifically, the results indicate that two forms of counterproductive behavior show a different pattern of association with justice measures. While the procedural justice and interactional justice of professors have a significant, low, and negative correlation with organizational deviance, only the interactional justice of colleagues has a significant, negative, but very low correlation with interpersonal deviance. In contrast, engagement correlates significantly, positively, but mostly low, with all dimensions of justice.

Table 2

Intercorrelation Matrix

	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Distributive justice of professors	.54**	.50**	.24**	.29**	-.41**	-.07	-.05	.20**
2. Procedural justice of professors	1	.55**	.19**	.38**	-.43**	-.21**	-.08	.24**
3. Interactional justice of professors		1	.23**	.38**	-.41**	-.16**	-.01	.25**
4. Interactional justice of colleagues			1	.25**	-.29**	-.04	-.10*	.22**
5. Pleasant emotions				1	-.44**	-.13**	-.03	.67**
6. Unpleasant emotions					1	.17**	.08	-.34**
7. Organizational deviance						1	.31**	-.22**
8. Interpersonal deviance							1	-.06
9. Engagement								1

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Pleasant emotions correlate most strongly with the overall level of engagement compared to other variables. As expected, engagement is negatively associated with unpleasant emotions and organizational deviance. Organizational deviance has a significant but low positive correlation with unpleasant emotions and a negative correlation with pleasant emotions, while interpersonal deviance does not correlate significantly with either engagement or emotions.

The findings from three hierarchical regression analyses, with engagement, organizational deviance, and interpersonal deviance as criteria are presented in Table 3. The first analysis revealed that both procedural and interactional justice exhibited by professors, along with interactional justice exhibited by colleagues, collectively account for 9.3% of the variability in work engagement. Furthermore, pleasant emotions additionally explain 35.4% of the variance in the criteria, while unpleasant emotions had no significant predictive power. Upon incorporating both pleasant and unpleasant emotions into the regression model, the significance of justice dimensions in predicting work engagement decreases. However, the overall model provides a comprehensive explanation, accounting for a total of 45.0% of the variance of the criterion.

Table 3

Hierarchical Regression Analyses: Standardized Coefficients of Predictors of Engagement and Counterproductive Behavior

Predictors	Engagement		Counterproductive work behavior			
			Organizational deviance		Interpersonal deviance	
	1. step	2. step	1. step	2. step	1. step	2. step
Distributive justice of professors	.03	-.00	.09	.11	-.02	-.01
Procedural justice of professors	.12*	-.03	-.21**	.18**	-.09	-.09
Interactional justice of professors	.13*	-.02	-.09	-.07	.08	.08
Interactional justice of colleagues	.16**	.05	-.01	-.02	-.09	-.09
Pleasant emotions		.65**		-.03		.02
Unpleasant emotions		-.06		.10		.05
<i>R</i>	.32**	.68**	.23**	.25**	.13	.14
<i>R</i> ² _{adj.}	.09**	.45**	.04**	.05**	.01	.01
ΔR		.36**		.01		.00

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

In the second analysis, organizational deviance was introduced as a criterion. In the first step, only the procedural justice of professors proved to be a significant predictor of organizational deviance, explaining 4.3% of its variance. In the second step, pleasant and unpleasant emotions in addition to the justice dimension did not explain a significant additional percentage of organizational deviances, but the overall model explained 4.7% of its variance, which was found to be statistically significant.

In the final hierarchical regression analysis, neither the justice dimensions nor the emotions contribute significantly to explaining the variance in interpersonal deviance.

In the next step, the mediating roles of pleasant emotions in the connections between justice dimensions and work engagement was tested by bootstrap analyses.

Table 4 and Figure 1 show the results of the Bootstrap analysis of the size and statistical significance of the indirect effect of justice dimensions on work engagement through pleasant emotions. The mediation effects were tested using the PROCESS macro, with bootstrapping procedures applied to estimate the indirect effects and their confidence intervals.

Table 4

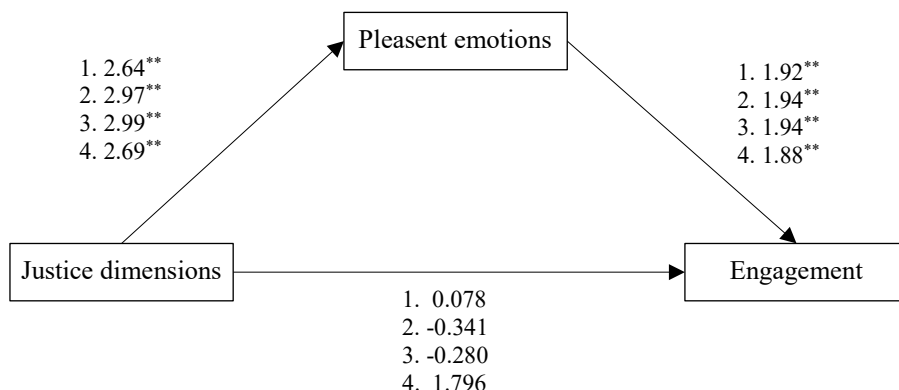
Results of the Bootstrap Analysis of the Size and Statistical Significance of the Indirect Effect of Justice Dimensions Through Positive Emotions on Engagement

Mediator	Model	B	SE	95% CI	95% CI
				Lower bound	Upper bound
Pleasant emotions	Distributive justice of professors	5.08	0.80	3.55	6.61
	Procedural justice of professors	5.76	0.77	4.28	7.31
	Interactional justice of professors	5.79	0.77	4.28	7.31
	Interactional justice of colleagues	5.06	0.92	3.37	6.99

The data presented in Figure 1 shows that none of the justice dimensions has a direct effect on work engagement. However, there is an indirect effect through pleasant emotions, which is largely consistent with the results of the hierarchical regression analysis. Furthermore, the equality of the total effects highlights the presence of full mediation across all dimensions of justice. In other words, the results indicate that the perception of justice in the academic environment favors the occurrence of pleasant emotions, which then have a positive effect on overall engagement.

Figure 1

Model of the Relationship Between Justice Dimensions (Distributive, Procedural, and Interactional Justice of Professors and Interactional Justice of Colleagues), Pleasant Emotions and Engagement



1. Distributive justice of professors $R^2 = .45$; $F(174.225)$; $p < .001$
2. Procedural justice of professors $R^2 = .45$; $F(174.356)$; $p < .001$
3. Interactional justice of professors $R^2 = .45$; $F(174.313)$; $p < .001$
4. Interactional justice of colleagues $R^2 = .46$; $F(176.416)$; $p < .001$

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to examine the relationship between four dimensions of justice perception with engagement and counterproductive academic behavior, and to investigate the possible mediating role of emotions in these relationships. While the relationships between justice perceptions, engagement, and counterproductive behavior are well-established in organizational research, their application and exploration within the academic setting remain relatively underexplored. The academic context presents unique dynamics, such as the direct influence of professors, academic pressure, and peer relationships, that can influence how justice perceptions affect student behavior and engagement. These aspects of the academic environment may result in different patterns of engagement and counterproductive behaviors compared to what is observed in organizational settings. This study provides valuable insight into how justice perceptions in academic contexts can shape student behavior and performance.

Previous research (Chory, 2007; Chory et al., 2017; Chory-Assad, 2002; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a, 2004b) has shown that the perception of justice can be conceptualized in an academic context as well as an organizational one. In the current study, students indicated that they rated the level of interactional justice of colleagues

the highest and interactional justice of professors the lowest. They felt that professors, compared to peers, exhibited less concern for their emotional well-being, paid less attention to their needs when assessing their work, and made less effort to understand their perspective. Previous studies (Chory et al., 2014; Horan et al., 2010) have primarily found evidence of procedural justice, but it has been firmly established that fair or unfair treatment is significant for students' emotions, attitudes, and behaviors (Chory-Assad, 2002).

This research confirmed a significant positive correlation between justice dimensions and academic engagement. These findings align with the assumptions of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that fair treatment by professors and peers can contribute to student motivation and engagement by fostering a supportive academic environment. While our study did not directly measure the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, previous research suggests that perceptions of fairness are associated with greater autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn can increase academic engagement (Molinari & Mameli, 2018). This finding aligns with previous studies indicating that students who perceive higher levels of justice within the academic environment also tend to exhibit somewhat higher levels of motivation for academic tasks (Chory-Assad, 2002). Of all the dimensions of justice, the interactional justice demonstrated by professors exhibited the strongest correlation with engagement. This reinforces the critical importance of the relationship between professors and students, as noted in previous research (Chory et al., 2014). This conclusion gains further support in the finding that interactional justice emerged as a significant predictor of engagement, which is also confirmed for the interactional justice of peers. Thus, it appears that in addition to the quality of relationships with professors, the perception of fair treatment from colleagues may promote greater commitment to fulfilling academic obligations.

Considering the counterproductive work behavior in the academic context, the data indicated that the justice dimensions showed a different pattern of association with the measures of organizational and interpersonal deviance. Only the perception of interactional justice of colleagues showed a low correlation with interpersonal deviance, while procedural and interactional justice of professors showed a negative, low correlation with organizational deviance. This pattern of results supports findings from the academic context (Chory et al., 2017), where perceptions of unfairness lead to frustration and, subsequently, organizational and interpersonal deviance. The distinction between interactions with professors and peers is important, as peer interactional justice is associated with interpersonal deviance, reflecting the significance of maintaining respectful peer relationships in academic settings. It is worth noting that these correlations were relatively lower compared to those observed between the justice and engagement dimensions. This could be attributed to the limited variability in the subscales of counterproductive work behavior and their infrequent occurrence, which is consistent with their relatively low prevalence at the general level in Croatia (Tomšić et al., 2014). Furthermore,

previous research (Chory et al., 2017; Horan et al., 2010) has highlighted that students exhibit varying responses to perceived unfair treatment, ranging from communicating disagreement in different manners to not reacting at all. Based on the data obtained, students report the least amount of interpersonal deviance, which is only significantly related to the interactional justice of colleagues. These results take into account the content of the two subscales and the assumption of the Source-Target Similarity Model (Lavelle et al., 2007). If students perceive that their colleagues respect, accept and treat them appropriately, they will be less inclined to direct their deviance towards them. If there is a lack of procedural and interactional justice on the part of professors, students will be more prone to organizational deviance, with such behaviors in this research most often associated with unjustified absences from class and colleagues signing the record list, which also supports the fact that reactions to unfair treatment are very often moderate, hidden and include indirect aggression (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004b). Distributive justice showed no correlation with the dimensions of counterproductive work behavior. This result contradicts the conclusions of previous research conducted on student samples (Chory et al., 2017; Horan et al., 2010) and the results of existing meta-analyses (Cohen-Charasha & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2013). Thus, in this research, students expressed organizational deviance to a lesser extent when they perceived that professors gave them clear instructions on the assessment procedures, while the fairness of the outcome itself was found to be irrelevant. This could be explained by the fact that students must follow the rules and processes established by professors every day (Chory et al., 2014), while the outcome is not visible on a daily basis. Namely, grades are only given at the end of the course, and points for different segments of the course are only awarded a few times during the semester. Accordingly, only the perception of professor's procedural justice proved to be a significant predictor of organizational deviance, while none of other justice dimensions significantly predicted the variance of interpersonal deviance.

When considering emotional well-being, it is evident that students reported equally the occurrence of pleasant and unpleasant emotions due to studying. In earlier literature, unpleasant emotions were often mentioned in theoretical models and research on organizational (in)justice, while pleasant emotions were largely and unjustifiably neglected (Colquitt et al., 2013). The data from this study reveal that students who perceived fair treatment, particularly in terms of procedural and interactional justice by professors, reported experiencing pleasant emotions to a higher extent. However, fair treatment by professors and colleagues has a slightly higher negative correlation with unpleasant emotions. These results are largely consistent with the meta-analysis conducted by Chory et al. (2017) which demonstrated a correlation between perceptions of unfairness and feelings of anger and frustration. Furthermore, pleasant emotions proved to be a significant predictor of engagement in addition to justice dimensions, which supports their importance in promoting motivation (Schaufeli & Van Rhenen, 2006) and an active approach to work tasks (Fredrickson, 2004). This result is not surprising considering the high

correlation between pleasant emotions and academic engagement, which may suggest a potential convergence of these constructs (Balducci et al., 2010). Given that academic engagement is defined as a positive motivational state that includes enthusiasm and inspiration (Schaufeli et al., 2002), it is important to acknowledge the potential overlap with the emotional components of engagement, such as vigor and dedication. Nevertheless, part of the variance of engagement that is not explained by pleasant emotions confirms the fact that this construct is not only saturated with affect, but also contains a cognitive segment (Schaufeli et al., 2002). On the other hand, students who reported experiencing higher levels of unpleasant emotions as a result of their studies showed less engagement, although this correlation was not as robust as that observed for pleasant emotions. Both types of emotions exhibit a modest but statistically significant correlation with organizational deviance, which is in line with expectations (Colquitt et al., 2013), with a slightly more pronounced relationship observed with unpleasant emotions. Contrary to our assumptions, theoretical considerations (Spector & Fox, 2005) and previous research (Colquitt et al., 2013), pleasant and unpleasant emotions did not significantly predict the variance of counterproductive work behavior across justice dimensions. Although the participants reported a moderate and equal level of both pleasant and unpleasant emotions, their behavior in the academic context could rarely be characterized as deviant, which is a possible cause of the given result. It is also possible that counterproductive behavior is influenced by broader life challenges beyond academic injustice, as these behaviors reflect rare and extreme actions.

Finally, based on the results of the hierarchical regression analysis, unpleasant emotions were not considered as mediators between the dimensions of justice and the dimensions of students' counterproductive work behavior. It was determined that positive emotions play a central role in the relationship between the justice dimensions and engagement. The results are consistent with Control-Value Theory (Pekrun, 2006), which emphasizes how emotions, such as satisfaction and frustration, mediate the relationship between perceived justice and academic outcomes. Pleasant emotions resulting from fair treatment can increase student motivation and engagement, while unpleasant emotions can hinder these outcomes. Although earlier research on a student sample (Kit, 2017; Zaluški, 2016) confirmed a positive relationship between fair treatment and engagement, none to our knowledge has considered the mediating role of positive emotions in their connection. Only recently have Colquitt et al. (2013) decided to highlight the role of pleasant and unpleasant emotions in the relationship between justice and organizational outcomes, thereby expanding the knowledge based on cognitive explanations. Consistent with the latter, our research has shown that the relationship between distributive, procedural and interactional justice of professors and interactional justice of colleagues with engagement can be fully explained by pleasant emotions. The importance of fair treatment by colleagues reflects interpersonal aspects like respect and acceptance. In practice, when colleagues fail to complete their part of a team task, it can trigger negative emotions, reducing

motivation or increasing behavioral engagement to achieve good grades. Namely, research in the organizational context has not considered this type of justice, even though many work tasks are team-orientated and imply dependence on others (Cropanzano et al., 2011). This is certainly the case for students who often do group seminars and perform other academic duties in smaller groups.

When interpreting the findings of this study, it is essential to recognize its limitations. First, subjective measures of counterproductive work behavior were utilized, resulting in a positively skewed distribution of results on the organizational and interpersonal deviance subscales that did not encompass the full spectrum of outcomes. This may partly stem from the inherent sensitivity of the measurement subject (Tomšić et al., 2014), leading participants to provide socially desirable responses. Although multi-focus justice has been widely used in organizational research for more than 20 years, its application in academic settings remains limited. This study contributes to the exploration of how justice perceptions from multiple sources may influence academic engagement and behavior. One limitation is the potential overlap between pleasant emotions and academic engagement, as the Utrecht scale measures dimensions such as vigor and dedication, which include emotional aspects. Future research could use engagement scales that include behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

A potential limitation of our study is the lack of control for employment status among the student participants, which may influence their behavior and engagement. Future research could explore this factor in more detail by specifically targeting full-time students or by controlling for employment status in the analysis.

The research conducted offers numerous practical and theoretical implications, particularly concerning the significance of emotional well-being in an academic framework. Previous studies have frequently utilized Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Rupp, 2008) to explain the connection between perceptions of fairness and various outcomes in the work environment, often overlooking the role of emotions, particularly positive ones. This research thus offers a novel perspective by demonstrating that fair treatment fosters pleasant emotions and that these serve as a mechanism through which perceptions of fairness positively influence academic engagement. Therefore, in addition to emphasizing social exchange, it is certainly justified to incorporate emotions into theoretical models of justice.

Furthermore, research indicates the validity of distinguishing between organizational and interpersonal deviance, as they are associated with different sources of justice. Specifically, the measure of organizational deviance included content indicative of indirect aggression toward professors, while interpersonal deviance primarily included actions directed toward colleagues.

In terms of practical implications, the data indicate that professors should be aware of the role they have in creating a pleasant and supportive work environment for students. Prioritizing the quality of interaction between professors and students is

crucial, given its substantial impact on engagement levels, which in turn can positively influence their productivity and success (Salanova et al., 2003; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Furthermore, it is important that professors consider carefully how they establish course guidelines and assign grades. Beyond fair treatment by professors, the rapport with colleagues has also demonstrated significance for students' emotions and engagement, underscoring the importance of cultivating a culture of mutual respect at faculty.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between distributive, procedural and interactional justice of professors and interactional justice of colleagues with engagement and organizational and interpersonal deviance. Furthermore, the research sought to determine whether emotions have a unique contribution in explaining engagement and dimensions of counterproductive academic behavior in addition to dimensions of justice and whether they play a mediating role in the relationship between perceptions of justice and academic outcomes.

We confirmed the positive relationship between the dimensions of justice and engagement and demonstrated that the justice dimensions have a different pattern of relationship with the measures of counterproductive academic behavior. Only the interpersonal justice of colleagues had a negative, but very low correlation with interpersonal deviance, while procedural and interpersonal justice correlated somewhat more significantly with organizational deviance. Furthermore, pleasant emotions proved to be a significant predictor of engagement in addition to the justice dimensions. The results of the mediation analysis confirmed the central role of emotions in the relationship between the dimensions of justice and engagement.

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Percepcija (ne)pravednosti, angažiranost i nepoželjna ponašanja u akademskome kontekstu: Medijacijska uloga emocija

Sažetak

Percepcija (ne)pravednosti postala je predmet znatnoga znanstvenog interesa u području organizacijske psihologije. Dosadašnja istraživanja u akademskome kontekstu ukazuju na to da je percepcija pravednosti pozitivno povezana s motivacijom te negativno povezana s ljutnjom i agresivnim ponašanjem prema profesorima. Međutim, mehanizmi djelovanja različitih aspekata pravednosti u akademskome kontekstu još uvijek nisu dovoljno istraženi. Cilj je ovoga istraživanja bio povećati razumijevanje percepcije pravednosti u akademskome kontekstu (1) ispitivanjem njezine povezanosti s angažiranošću i nepoželjnim ponašanjem te (2) promatranjem emocija kao posrednika tih odnosa. Ukupno 426 studenata ispunilo je mrežni upitnik koji se sastojao od Ljestvice pravednosti profesora i vršnjaka, Ljestvice afektivne dobrobiti za studente, Ljestvice radne angažiranosti za studentsku populaciju i Upitnika nepoželjnoga organizacijskog ponašanja za studentsku populaciju. Analiza podataka ukazala je na pozitivnu povezanost među četirima dimenzijama percepcije pravednosti i angažiranosti. Mjere nepoželjnoga ponašanja pokazale su poseban obrazac povezanosti s dimenzijama percepcije pravednosti: samo je interakcijska pravednost kolega bila negativno povezana s interpersonalnom devijantnošću, dok su proceduralna i interakcijska pravednost profesora bile negativno povezane s organizacijskom devijantnošću. Ugodne emocije objasnile su značajan dio varijance angažiranosti povrh svih dimenzija pravednosti i posredovale su njihove odnose s angažiranošću. Ugodne i neugodne emocije nisu pokazale jedinstven doprinos u predviđanju dimenzija nepoželjnoga ponašanja povrh pravednosti. Rezultati potvrđuju relevantnost percepcije pravednosti u akademskome kontekstu i pružaju smjernice za stvaranje okruženja koje potiče ugodne emocije i povećava studentsku angažiranost.

Ključne riječi: percepcija pravednosti, percepcija akademske pravednosti, emocije, angažiranost, nepoželjno akademsko ponašanje

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