

Ethical Leadership as a Substitute for Justice Enactment: An Information-Processing Perspective

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Why do employees perceive that they have been treated fairly by their supervisor? Theory and research on justice generally presumes a straightforward answer to this question: Because the supervisor adhered to justice rules. We propose the answer is not so straightforward and that employee justice perceptions are not merely “justice-laden.” Drawing from theory on information processing that distinguishes between automatic and systematic modes, we suggest that employee justice perceptions are also “ethics-laden.” Specifically, we posit that employees with more ethical supervisors form justice perceptions through automatic processing with little scrutiny of or attention paid to a supervisor’s justice acts. In contrast, employees with less ethical supervisors rely on systematic processing to evaluate their supervisor’s justice enactment and form justice perceptions. Thus, we propose that ethical leadership substitutes for the supervisor’s justice enactment. Our results demonstrate support for the interactive effect of supervisor justice enactment and ethical leadership on employee justice perceptions, and we further demonstrate its consequences for employees’ engagement in discretionary behaviors (citizenship and counterproductive behaviors). Our findings highlight an assumption in the justice literature in need of revision and opens the door to further inquiry about the role of information processing in justice perceptions.

Keywords: organizational justice, ethical leadership, substitutes for justice, citizenship behavior, counterproductive behavior

For decades, scholars have shown that employee justice perceptions (an employee’s assessment of a supervisor’s adherence to justice rules; Colquitt, 2001) are predictive of important attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2013). Yet until recently, little was known about the antecedents of those perceptions (Colquitt, 2012). Called the “fifth wave of justice” (Brockner,

Wiesenfeld, Siegel, Bobocel, & Liu, 2015), scholars are now seeking to understand why employees do, or do not, perceive justice from a supervisor. To that end, research has identified predictors such as employee personality, ingratiation, charisma, and trustworthiness (Huang, Cropanzano, Li, Shao, Zhang, & Li, 2017; Koopman, Matta, Scott, & Conlon, 2015; Scott, Colquitt, & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Zapata, Olsen, & Martins, 2013).

Two recent investigations (Huang et al., 2017; Zapata et al., 2013) differentiate employee justice perceptions from *supervisor justice enactment* (the supervisor’s reported justice rule adherence; Scott, Colquitt, & Paddock, 2009), positioning the latter as an antecedent of the former. Because supervisor justice enactment and employee justice perceptions are seemingly two sides of the same coin, their relationship has been referred to as “obvious” (Zapata et al., 2013, p. 4) and a “central assumption” in the justice literature (Huang et al., 2017, p. 1567). However, the average correlation between supervisor justice enactment and employee justice perceptions found by the aforementioned authors was .35 and .36, respectively. Moreover, Lind (2001, p. 66) noted employee justice perceptions are often “at variance to reality” and Zapata, Carton, and Liu (2016) found that supervisor race alters the strength of this relationship.

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Thus, the time is ripe to reconsider how “obvious” this relationship really is. In fact, this examination is overdue: Nearly 30 years ago, Greenberg (1990) remarked that although some supervisors report not enacting justice, employees often still perceive that they have been treated justly. Why might this be? One explanation is those employees devoted little effort to scrutinizing their supervisor’s justice acts. Otherwise, they may have recognized, for example, a lack of opportunity to express their views, or a failure to be treated with dignity and respect. Yet the notion that employees might be inattentive to a supervisor’s lack of adherence to justice rules is initially difficult to reconcile with views of justice as “central” to working life (Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2015, p. 4) and a source of need fulfillment (Kanfer, Frese, & Johnson, 2017).

Theory on information processing offers an opportunity to build consensus among these observations. Justice enactment reflects a supervisor’s adherence to rules (Colquitt, 2001). Forming justice perceptions from this adherence (or, lack thereof) typically requires employees to devote attention to—systematically process—their supervisor’s actions to assess whether a supervisor did, or did not, adhere to those rules (Barclay, Bashshur, & Fortin, 2017; Lind, 2001). Because justice is important, employees will systematically process this information if necessary. However, people are cognitive misers and “prefer a less effortful mode of processing (automatic processing) to one that requires more time and cognitive resources (systematic processing)” (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012, p. 247). Automatic processing relies upon associations among knowledge structures such as memories and schemas to form judgments. If those judgments are plausible or favorable, this system will “fill in unobserved details” through “pattern-completion or similarity-based retrieval” from long-term memory (Smith & DeCoster, 2000, p. 111). Thus, justice perceptions can be automatically formed from information that is unique, but related to, justice enactment, making the systematic processing of a supervisor’s justice acts unnecessary.

With this in mind, three questions arise constituting the motivation behind our study. First, when might employees be comfortable with their automatically formed justice perceptions and be less attentive to their supervisor’s justice acts? Although the associative nature of automatic processing allows for connections between justice and unique concepts, those concepts must be both plausibly related to justice and relatively stable (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012; Lind, 2001). Evidence suggests employee perceptions of leaders tend to be stable, making them ideal for use in automatic processing (Lord & Maher, 1991). In particular, we looked to ethical leadership, which is the “demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005, p. 120). We chose ethical leadership because, although it is distinct from justice (Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012), it has notable conceptual overlap (Brown et al., 2005). In addition, because ethical leadership goes beyond the discrete actions of a person, employee perceptions of ethical leadership tend to be relatively stable (Den Hartog, 2015).

Second, what is the nature of the relationship between supervisor justice enactment and ethical leadership? Drawing from information processing, at high levels of ethical leadership we expect employees will rely primarily on this leader characteristic to form justice perceptions. This should happen automatically, and the favorability of this judgment should lessen employee sensitivity to, or attention directed

toward, the supervisor’s justice acts (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012; Lind, 2001). In contrast, low levels of ethical leadership should initially lead to low perceptions of justice. However, theory on information processing predicts employees will be less willing to accept this unfavorable assessment without additional, systematic consideration of their supervisor’s justice acts (Evans, 2008). This implies a substitutive effect (Howell, Dorfman, & Kerr, 1986) of ethical leadership for justice enactment, in that justice enactment should primarily be associated with justice perceptions at low levels of ethical leadership.

Finally, what are the consequences of the aforementioned interactive relationship? On this point, two pieces of information coalesce to provide a clue. First, justice enactment serves as a contribution to social exchange relationships with employees (e.g., Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In return, employees should behave in ways that benefit the supervisor (e.g., Blau, 1964). Second, although those exchanges can be directly reciprocal, they need not be (Flynn, 2005). Thus, although employees may respond to justice enactment (or, lack thereof) through behaviors directed toward the supervisor, they also might direct those behaviors toward other group members. Indeed, a primary function of justice is to prompt individuals to focus on the collective (Lind, 2001; Tyler & Blader, 2003). These two threads dovetail in suggesting employee citizenship and (the lack of) counterproductive work behavior—both of which are quintessential, discretionary actions directed toward others—as likely downstream consequences for the theory we develop.

In addressing these questions, our article makes several contributions. First, our examination of ethical leadership’s substitutive effect for justice enactment enhances both literatures. Rodell, Colquitt, and Baer (2017, p. 14) noted that although the consensus is employee justice perceptions are justice-laden, this assumption is “incomplete and problematic.” By showing these perceptions to also be “ethics-laden,” our investigation answers calls in the literature to investigate the interactive relationship between justice enactment and ethical leadership (van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & van Knippenberg, 2007). In addition, our use of an information processing lens responds to a call from Barclay et al. (2017) to build justice theory drawing from this perspective. These authors note information-processing concepts are implicit within the justice literature, but rarely made explicit. We address this and provide a template for future investigations on the interplay between automatic and systematic information processing strategies in the formation of justice perceptions. By highlighting how information from one system can substitute for the other, we contribute to theory on information processing by making the interrelation of these systems an explicit part of our hypothesis development. In a multisource field study, we show a substitutive relationship between supervisor justice enactment and ethical leadership, as well as downstream implications for these relationships in the form of organizational citizenship behaviors and counterproductive work behaviors.

Theory and Hypotheses

Justice Enactment, Justice Perceptions, and Information Processing

As defined above, justice enactment and justice perceptions both refer to justice, but from different perspectives. The former repre-

sents the supervisor's enacted adherence to justice rules (Scott et al., 2009) whereas the latter reflects an employee's perception of adherence (Colquitt et al., 2013). As both assess the same phenomenon, there are reasons to expect them to be related. Employees regularly monitor their supervisor's justice-relevant actions (Long, Bendersky, & Morrill, 2011) and can observe these acts during interactions involving rewards, discipline, coaching, mentoring, or feedback (e.g., Bies, 2005; Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000). Moreover, justice has a strong social component, as employees often share their justice experiences with coworkers (Baer et al., 2018). Thus, employees have many opportunities to evaluate their supervisor's justice enactment and use this information to form justice perceptions.

Yet despite these opportunities, do employees really spend time and attention evaluating their supervisor's justice acts? Although theory and empirics are a bit mixed on this point (see Barclay et al., 2017), implicit in most research is that justice is salient and top of mind for employees. Indeed, Greenberg (2011, p. 271) wrote, "By nature, people are attuned to the fairness, or justice, of events, situations, individuals, and other entities." An information-processing lens somewhat changes this story, however. Through this lens, a supervisor's justice enactment is another (albeit, potentially important) piece of information in the immense data-stream to which employees are subjected daily (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Weick, 1979). We do not dispute that employees want justice to satisfy a variety of needs (Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001). However, we submit that if employees can obtain this information by relying upon previously stored information about a supervisor, instead of exerting cognitive effort to focus on and evaluate the justice-relevant acts of that supervisor, they will do so. This speaks to the fundamental distinction between automatic versus systematic information processing.

Scholars from many disciplines have proposed dual-process models of human cognition (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2007). A general point of consensus is the existence of a fast-acting, associative system termed *automatic processing* and a slower, cognitively demanding system termed *systematic processing*. Automatic processing is primarily preconscious, guiding decisions and judgments based on previously experienced and stored information (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Operating under Chaiken's "least effort principle" (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012), when automatic processing provides a judgment deemed plausible and acceptable, individuals are unlikely to consider the issue further with effortful systematic processing (see also Lind, 2001).

If a judgment formed from automatic processing is unfavorable, or the individual desires a greater level of confidence, theory predicts additional scrutiny from the systematic information processing system (Evans & Stanovich, 2013). This processing mode puts heavy demands on working memory and cognitive resources, so individuals typically reserve it for situations with critical, self-referential consequences (Evans, 2008; Kahneman, 2011; Reynolds, 2006). When used, systematic processing relies on an intentional and deliberate memory search for, and analysis of, relevant information (Smith & DeCoster, 2000). Below, we apply this theory to the interactive (substitutive) relationship of ethical leadership and supervisor justice enactment.

Ethical Leadership as a Substitute for Justice Enactment

Ethical leadership refers to a principled and moral approach to influencing followers (Brown & Treviño, 2006). According to Treviño, Hartman, and Brown (2000), one must be both a moral person and a moral manager to be an ethical leader. The former reflects qualities of the leader "as a person at work and beyond" (Den Hartog, 2015, p. 411) and taps stable components of an individual's ethos such as whether her/his life is conducted in an ethical manner or whether she/he keeps the best interests of employees in mind. The latter, in contrast, focuses on more work-specific acts, such as discussing business ethics with employees or role-modeling appropriate work conduct, to "promote ethics in the workplace" (Den Hartog, 2015, p. 411).

Leadership scholars hold that employees frequently rely on the types of cognitive simplification associated with automatic information processing when evaluating leaders (Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, & Topakas, 2013). That is, when a leader's characteristics and qualities match with employee expectations, those employees will tend to automatically form judgments about the supervisor (e.g., Lord, Foti, & Phillips, 1982). This should be true in the case of ethical leaders; indeed, these individuals generally act in ways that are consistent with "general expectations regarding how leaders should behave in a work context" (Piccolo, Greenbaum, den Hartog, & Folger, 2010, p. 261). Moreover, Reynolds (2006) developed theory arguing that individuals typically process ethical situations and stimuli automatically.

Given this, we expect employees to automatically process information about supervisors perceived as high on ethical leadership. When forming justice perceptions about this leader, prior acts such as rewarding deserving followers, promoting voice, communicating honestly and respectfully, and other similar behaviors should correspond to principles of justice in the employee's mind. These similarities between ethical leadership and justice should lead to higher levels of justice perceptions. This statement, however, is relatively established: Ethical leaders are attuned to the fair treatment of their followers (Kalshoven, den Hartog, & de Hoogh, 2011; Treviño et al., 2000), ethical leadership and justice perceptions have been confirmed as unique constructs (Mayer et al., 2012), and the influence of ethical leadership on various dimensions of justice perceptions has been shown (e.g., Loi, Lam, & Chan, 2012; Xu, Loi, & Ngo, 2016).

Applying an information-processing lens, however, reveals something new. Based on Chaiken's "least effort principle," if a judgment from automatic processing is deemed sufficient, employees are unlikely to exert additional effort scrutinizing it systematically. Supervisors who demonstrate high levels of ethical leadership not only convey a sense of virtue and integrity to others, but also regularly demonstrate these characteristics through their everyday behaviors (Treviño et al., 2000). For example, Treviño, Brown, and Hartman (2003, p. 18) described ethical leaders as being people-focused, ethical role models, and the kind of person who is seen as "doing the right thing." In a similar vein, Fehr, Yam, and Dang (2015) noted ethical leaders are concerned for the well-being of followers, and demonstrate this by helping them to develop skills and showing compassion for their problems. These supervisors are seen as stable and consistent partners upon whom employees can rely (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Ng & Feldman,

2015), and feel secure with (Tu & Lu, 2013), making high levels of justice plausible.

It is reasonable to question, however: Can an ethical leader enact low levels of justice? There are reasons to think the answer is yes. Scholars have noted that supervisors have reasons, consistent with being an ethical leader, for not adhering to justice rules. Lind and van den Bos (2002) noted justice enactment can be costly in that it requires the investment of two scarce resources—time and money—and that leaders must determine where to spend these resources. Ethical leaders are aware of the consequences of their actions (Den Hartog, 2015) and so a leader may recognize resource constraints require adhering to some justice rules and not others to best serve the workgroup or organization; indeed, Lind and van den Bos (2002, p. 208) noted supervisors cannot “seize every opportunity.” Li, Masterson, and Sprinkle (2012) similarly argue supervisors often pursue multiple goals simultaneously, and so enactment of a particular justice rule may at times be secondary and conflict with achievement of a primary goal (e.g., Meindl, 1989). In that case, an ethical leader may not adhere to that rule. For example, distributive justice is frequently conceptualized as reflecting an equity rule; however, an ethical leader may feel the best interests of the group are served by enacting an alternative allocation rule (i.e., equality). As another example, ethical leaders punish followers for engaging in inappropriate conduct (Brown et al., 2005). Yet, in the course of the discipline, ethical leaders may violate rules of justice by failing to grant voice or an appeal, raising their voice, or withholding information.

Thus, we expect employees to rely on their ethical leadership perceptions to form justice perceptions and see no reason to systematically evaluate their supervisor’s justice enactment. This is consistent with fairness heuristic theory, which posits that employees automatically form justice perceptions based on available, justice-relevant information (Lind, 2001). Ethical leadership’s similarity with justice allows it to serve as a cue from which employees form justice perceptions, and this judgment should be sufficiently favorable so that employees will not devote much attention to their supervisor’s justice acts. Accordingly, supervisor justice enactment should have little effect on employee justice perceptions at high levels of ethical leadership.

Although employees should be more likely to rely on automatic processing when assessing justice at high levels of ethical leadership, they should be less likely at low levels (Barclay et al., 2017; Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012). Of note, low ethical leadership is not synonymous with unethical leadership. That is, these forms of leadership are not “polar opposites” (Den Hartog, 2015, p. 417). Unethical leadership encompasses destructive behaviors such as the exploitation, excessive monitoring, or isolation of employees that harms both employee wellbeing and organizational performance (e.g., Den Hartog, 2015; Kalshoven & den Hartog, 2013). In contrast, supervisors who demonstrate low levels of ethical leadership fail to make ethics a priority, either in terms of their own workplace actions, the standards they set, or in the actions of their followers (Brown et al., 2005). Brown and Treviño (2006) similarly highlight that low ethical leadership reflects the lack of an agenda that promotes ethics in the workplace, thus making these concerns not a salient component of employees’ working lives. Employees tend not to see these leaders as viable exchange partners, or as being good steward of the work group or organization (Den Hartog, 2015). As a result, employees of these leaders are

often less engaged and more willing to question their leader’s integrity (Demirtas, 2015; Lawton & Paez, 2015).

Justice is critical for employees in general (e.g., Cropanzano et al., 2001), and its salience should be heightened in this situation. Given how employees view supervisors not perceived as ethical leaders, Chaiken’s “least effort principle” is unlikely to be satisfied at low levels of ethical leadership, as the initial automatic assessment of justice would likely be unfavorable. That is, low levels of justice have negative consequences, and so employees are unlikely to accept an automatic assessment. In this case, theory holds that employees will instead systematically evaluate their supervisor’s various justice-relevant acts and rely on this information to form justice perceptions (Kunda, 1990). That is, employees will be more likely to access stored representations of what it means for a supervisor to enact justice, and to evaluate their supervisor’s actions against those rules (e.g., Smith & DeCoster, 2000). This awareness of, and sensitivity to, their supervisor’s justice acts should lead supervisor justice enactment to positively affect employee justice perceptions at low levels of ethical leadership.

In sum, our theorizing leads us to expect a substitution relationship between ethical leadership and supervisor justice enactment in the prediction of employee justice perceptions. Drawing from Howell et al. (1986), there are three conditions for interactive substitution relationships. First, the substitutive variable (ethical leadership) must logically replace the focal variable (supervisor justice enactment). Our information-processing lens provides this logic, articulating why employees might rely on ethical leadership to automatically form justice perceptions (e.g., Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012). Second, the substitute should exert an effect only at certain levels. As we discuss above, we expect only high levels of ethical leadership to substitute for justice enactment. At low levels, employees should be motivated to exert effort in evaluating their supervisor’s justice enactment (Bobocel, McCline, & Folger, 1997). Third, the substitute construct itself should have an impact on the criterion (employee justice perceptions). We expect this effect for both theoretical (e.g., Brown et al., 2005; Treviño et al., 2000) and empirical (e.g., Loi et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2016) reasons. Thus, we hypothesize,

Hypothesis 1: Supervisor justice enactment and ethical leadership interact, such that the relationship between supervisor justice enactment and employee justice perceptions is stronger at low (vs. high) levels of ethical leadership.

Behavioral Outcomes

The role of information-processing is to interpret the environment and use this information to plan subsequent responses (Hastie & Park, 1986; March & Simon, 1958). Thus, this lens reveals employee behavior is driven not by an original stimulus, but instead by the employee’s cognitive representation of that stimulus (Hollander, 1992). For supervisor justice enactment, the employee’s cognitive representation of this stimulus—justice perceptions—should provide the linkage with subsequent downstream employee behavior.

Scholars have long considered justice enactment as a supervisor’s contribution to an exchange relationship with employees (Masterson et al., 2000), and ethical leadership research is often framed in the same way (e.g., Den Hartog, 2015). Thus, we opted

to focus on discretionary employee behaviors typically seen as reflecting employee contributions to those exchange relationships. One important point, however, is that employee reciprocation may, but need not, be directed toward the original exchange partner (i.e., the supervisor; Flynn, 2005). Indeed, a primary function of justice is to prompt individuals to a focus on benefitting the collective (Lind, 2001; Tyler & Blader, 2003). On the basis of this, we chose to examine both citizenship (“performance that supports the social and psychological environment in which task performance takes place”; Organ, 1997, p. 95) and counterproductive work behavior (“voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms”; Bennett & Robinson, 2000, p. 349). Citizenship and counterproductive behavior are considered exemplars of the social exchange outcomes of justice (Colquitt et al., 2013), thus providing a tight linkage between our study and the extant literature.

One way employees work toward the benefit of the group is by being a good citizen (e.g., Masterson et al., 2000). This is because citizenship behaviors are critical to the functioning of the work unit (Organ, 1997) and are associated with increases in unit performance (Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009). Thus, when employees perceive higher levels of justice, one way in which they may respond is through extrarole behaviors that benefit others in the workplace (Colquitt et al., 2013). Alternatively, employees may engage in fewer counterproductive behaviors; indeed, “refraining from injuring” is also a form of reciprocity in exchange relationships (Colquitt et al., 2013, p. 201). Other research substantiates this, noting that employees often retaliate following low levels of justice (e.g., Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001).

Thus, we expect that higher levels of perceived justice will be associated with higher levels of citizenship behavior and lower levels of counterproductive behavior. Overall, we expect a moderated mediation relationship, such that employee justice perceptions mediate the interactive relationship between supervisor justice enactment and ethical leadership on these outcomes. Moreover, although justice perceptions are a logical and important mediator here, we suspect that supervisor justice enactment may influence employee behavior through other mechanisms as well. Thus, we expect partial mediation only.

Hypothesis 2: The mediated relationship (indirect effect) between supervisor justice enactment and organizational citizenship behavior (through employee justice perceptions) is stronger at low (vs. high) levels of ethical leadership.

Hypothesis 3: The mediated relationship (indirect effect) between supervisor justice enactment and counterproductive work behavior (through employee justice perceptions) is stronger at low (vs. high) levels of ethical leadership.

Overview of the Present Research

We report results from a multisource field study consisting of supervisors and several direct reports. This allowed us to examine intact workgroups of individuals who work under a supervisor who may or may not enact justice, and who may or may not be perceived as an ethical leader. Our theory does not provide reason to expect differential effects across dimensions of justice. For this reason, we used an operationalization recently suggested by Colquitt (2012), wherein justice is operationalized as an aggregate measure composed of its four dimensions. This approach over-

comes some limitations of “overall” measures (e.g., overall measures oversample from some justice dimensions, compared to others; Colquitt, 2012; Colquitt & Rodell, 2015) and has been used in several recent articles (Dunford, Jackson, Boss, Tay, & Boss, 2015; Rodell et al., 2017; Zhang, LePine, Buckman, & Wei, 2013). Thus, we did this for both justice enactment and perceptions. We also use two operationalizations each for citizenship and counterproductive behavior. For citizenship, we looked at interpersonally- and organizationally-directed behavior (Lee & Allen, 2002). For counterproductive behavior, we looked at supervisor resistance (Tepper, Eisenbach, Kirby, & Potter, 1998), as well as a broader measure of supervisor-directed deviant behavior (Bennett & Robinson, 2000).

Method

Sample and Procedures

Data for this study was collected as per Michigan State University’s IRB# 12–557: Supervisor & Subordinate Relationships in Organizations. We recruited the participants for this study from organizations predominantly located in the Midwestern United States using a snowball approach with undergraduate students (for recent exemplars, see Harrison & Wagner, 2016; Matta, Scott, Koopman, & Conlon, 2015; Mayer et al., 2012; Priesemuth, Schminke, Ambrose, & Folger, 2014). Participants worked in a number of different industries such as health care, construction, education, transportation, and local government. In each organization, a focal individual was contacted and asked to complete an online survey to participate in the study and to provide us with a work e-mail address for at least two, and up to four, members of their workgroup, as well as the group’s supervisor. Upon receiving this information, we contacted the coworkers and supervisor by e-mail to describe the study and request their participation. We offered all participants a \$10 honorarium for their participation. Because workgroup sizes vary, and because of best practice requirements for multilevel modeling (Gabriel, Koopman, Rosen, & Johnson, 2018), we followed precedent to obtain a minimum of three individuals (the focal employee plus at least two coworkers) from each group.

Scholars from a number of different literatures agree that, although some workgroups may be larger than three to five individuals, this is generally a sufficient number of responses to accurately represent phenomena within a workgroup (Ambrose, Schminke, & Mayer, 2013; Priesemuth et al., 2014; Tracey & Tews, 2005). Furthermore, a minimum of three individuals per group is important for accurately representing the multilevel relationships in our model (e.g., Hox, 2002) and is a common criterion in other multilevel research (Loi, Yang, & Diefendorff, 2009; Rosen, Koopman, Gabriel, & Johnson, 2016; Trougakos, Hideg, Cheng, & Beal, 2014).

Initially, 355 individuals were recruited and asked to participate in the study. Nearly all of these individuals (350) completed the initial survey. These individuals provided information for 894 coworkers and 350 supervisors, from whom we received 563 (63%) and 200 (57%) completed surveys, respectively. Because we needed at least three responses per workgroup (i.e., Priesemuth et al., 2014), as well as a supervisor report of justice enactment, we retained groups that fit both criteria. We had 167 workgroups with

at least 3 responses and 200 workgroups with a supervisor report. Combining these left us with 142 workgroups (581 total cases). Following best practices for snowball data (Marcus, Weigelt, Hergert, Gurt, & Gelleri, 2017), we then investigated each group by inspecting IP addresses, survey time-stamps, and e-mail addresses. An additional 10 groups raised red flags here (e.g., all surveys completed from the same IP address and/or in rapid succession). This left us with a final sample of 541 responses in 132 workgroups.¹

In terms of demographics, 60% of employees identified as female with an average age of 40.9 years ($SD = 12.35$). Average job tenure for employees was 5.5 years ($SD = 14.09$). In terms of the ethnicity of participants, 80.4% identified as Caucasian, 3.9% as African American, 9.6% as Asian, and the remainder identified as either Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander or declined to answer. For the workgroup supervisors, 42% identified as female with an average age of 45 years ($SD = 9.9$). Average job tenure was 8.0 years ($SD = 7.6$), and supervisors reported interacting with their employees, on average, 26.2 hr per week ($SD = 14.5$). In terms of ethnicity, 82.6% of supervisors identified as Caucasian, 3.0% as African American, 6.8% as Asian, and the remainder identified as either Hispanic, Middle Eastern, or declined to answer.

Measures

As described in the Overview of Present Research section, we followed recent calls (e.g., Colquitt, 2012) and empirical examples (e.g., Dunford et al., 2015; Rodell et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2013) and operationalized justice enactment and perceptions as overall constructs using measures of the four justice dimensions and their items from Colquitt (2001).

Supervisor justice enactment. We measured justice enactment from the workgroup supervisor using the 20 items developed by Colquitt (2001). The items were worded to reflect enactment. For distributive justice, we prompted supervisors to consider “the outcomes you provide to the employees you directly supervise.” An example item is “to what extent are the outcomes you provide reflective of the effort they have put into their work?” For procedural justice, we prompted supervisors to consider “procedures you use to make decisions regarding the employees you directly supervise.” An example item is “to what extent have procedures been free of bias?” For informational justice, we prompted supervisors to consider “how you communicate with the employees you directly supervise.” An example item is “to what extent do you communicate details in a timely manner to your employees?” For interpersonal justice, we prompted supervisors to consider “how you act towards the employees you directly supervise.” An example item is “to what extent do you treat your employees in a polite manner?” Each scale was rated from 1 (*to a very small extent*) to 5 (*to a very large extent*). Alphas for these scales were .95 for distributive justice, .79 for procedural justice, .76 for informational justice, and .88 for interpersonal justice. Coefficient alpha for the combined scale was .88.

Employee justice perceptions. We used the 20 items developed by Colquitt (2001) to assess employee justice perceptions. We asked employees to focus on their supervisor’s actions in general and not on any specific event. For distributive justice, we prompted employees to consider “the outcomes you receive from

your supervisor.” An example item is “to what extent are the outcomes you receive reflective of the effort you put into your work?” For procedural justice, we prompted employees to consider “the procedures your supervisor uses to make decisions.” An example item is “to what extent have those procedures been free of bias?” For informational justice, we prompted employees to consider “how your supervisor communicates.” An example is “to what extent does your supervisor communicate details in a timely manner?” For interpersonal justice, we prompted employees to consider “how your supervisor acts toward you.” An example item is “to what extent does your supervisor treat you in a polite manner?” Each scale was rated from 1 (*to a very small extent*) to 5 (*to a very large extent*). Alphas for these scales were .97 for distributive justice, .90 for procedural justice, .92 for informational justice, and .96 for interpersonal justice. Alpha for the combined scale was .94.

Ethical leadership. We measured ethical leadership with 10 items from Brown et al. (2005). Employees rated their agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). An example item is “my supervisor sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics.” Coefficient alpha was .93.

Organizationally-directed citizenship behavior (OCBO). We measured OCBO using eight items from Lee and Allen (2002). Employees reported the frequency of this behavior on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). An example item is “express loyalty toward the organization.” Coefficient alpha was .90.

Interpersonally-directed citizenship behavior (OCBI). We measured OCBI using eight items from Lee and Allen (2002). Employees reported the frequency of this behavior on the same scale as OCBO. An example item is “assist others with their duties.” Coefficient alpha was .86.

Supervisor-directed resistance. We measured supervisor-directed resistance using four items from Tepper et al. (1998). Employees reported the frequency with which they resisted requests made by their supervisor. We used the same scale as with citizenship behavior. An example item is “when my supervisor asks me to do things, I refuse.” Coefficient alpha was .85.

Supervisor-directed deviance. We measured supervisor-directed deviance using seven items from Bennett and Robinson (2000). Employees reported the frequency of this behavior using the same scale as above. An example item is “I act rudely toward my supervisor.” Coefficient alpha was .85.

Control Variables

Rodell et al. (2017) recently demonstrated that employee justice perceptions can be influenced by the charismatic qualities of a supervisor via an affective mechanism. That is, charismatic qualities influenced employee positive affect, which subsequently influenced justice perceptions. We therefore controlled for this mechanism with a five-item measure of employee positive affect at work (Mackinnon, Jorm, Christensen, Korten, Jacomb, & Rodgers, 1999). Example items are “excited,” and “enthusiastic;” coeffi-

¹ Given our snowball design, we examined mean differences of focal constructs for all employees who completed our initial survey compared to those who remained in our final sample and found no significant differences.

cient $\alpha = .84$. We tested our model both with and without this variable (Becker, 2005). Our results were unchanged, and so to provide a conservative estimate of our results we retained positive affect in our final model.

Analysis

We performed all analyses using Mplus 7.11. Given our use of an overall measure of justice, we first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the adequacy of this conceptualization. This approach positions overall justice as a latent, second-order factor with the four justice dimensions serving as first-order indicators, and the items serving as indicators of their respective dimension. Our data is multilevel, as we surveyed multiple employees nested within a supervisor. Accordingly, at Level 1 (within-workgroups), we modeled employee ratings of justice perceptions and at Level 2 (between-workgroups) we modeled supervisor ratings of justice enactment. This model provided adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 969.50, p < .05, df = 332$, comparative fit index [CFI] = .91, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .06, standardized root mean residual [SRMR] = .07). For both the employee and supervisor reports, the standardized loadings for each item on its respective first-order factor were significant ($p < .001$), as were all factor loadings for the first-order justice dimensions on the latent second-order factor. Moreover, all item loadings well-exceeded recommended minimum cutoffs (Hinkin, 1998).

Following this, we conducted a CFA on all study constructs. As justice and ethical leadership are conceptually similar and likely to share variance, confirming their empirical distinction is important (although, research has previously demonstrated this distinction; Mayer et al., 2012). At Level 2 (between-workgroups), we modeled supervisor enactment of justice as described above. At Level 1 (within-workgroups), we modeled employee perceptions of justice as described above, as well as ethical leadership, citizenship and deviant behavior, and positive affect (a control). The model adequately fit the data ($\chi^2 = 3535.40, p < .05, df = 1970$, CFI = .89, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .06). Although the RMSEA and SRMR values suggest adequate fit, the CFI value of .89 misses is below the value of .90 that is generally seen as an acceptable in management research (Williams, O'Boyle, & Yu, 2017). It is important to note, however, that values such as this "were only intended as guidelines," particularly when the actual data differs from the conditions used to develop those guidelines (e.g., with multilevel data such as ours).

Despite this, we did conduct a series of additional CFAs to examine this issue further. One potential explanation for the lower-than-ideal fit of our model is that the full model is estimating a large number of parameters, and thus exceeds the 5-to-1 ratio of parameters to sample size recommended by Bentler and Chou (1987). We therefore adopted several different modeling strategies to reduce the number of estimated parameters in our model. First, because we have already provided fit information for our justice constructs, we ran an additional CFA on the remainder of our study variables (ethical leadership, both citizenship behavior measures, supervisor-directed resistance and deviance, as well as positive affect). This model adequately fit the data ($\chi^2 = 1457.95, p < .05, df = 804$, CFI = .90, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .05).

Following this, we followed recommendations made by Hall, Snell, and Foust (1999) regarding the use of item parcels (another

strategy for reducing the number of estimated model parameters). These authors advocate for the use of item parcels in situations such as ours, where there is a relatively large number of parameters to be estimated, relative to sample size. We conducted this CFA with all of the measures in our study but adopted Hall and colleagues' suggestions for the constructs in our model with seven items or more (OCBO, OCBI, supervisor-directed deviance, and ethical leadership), and used three parcels each (four for ethical leadership). These authors suggested that the best way to create these parcels is to conduct an exploratory factor analysis for each construct and to force the extraction of the same number of factors as the planned number of parcels. Parcels are then created by grouping the highest loading items on the extracted factors. This model adequately fit the data ($\chi^2 = 1959.59, p < .05, df = 960$, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .05). Then, to ensure that the model's fit is robust to the particular item groupings, we ran our CFA 5 additional times, each time randomly assigning the items for each construct to parcels. Each of these additional models adequately fit the data, with very little difference between models. The χ^2 values ranged from 1892.36 to 1932.74, and the values for CFI (.93), RMSEA (.04), and SRMR (.05) were essentially identical across models, varying slightly at the thousandths place. Given all of this evidence for the adequate fit of the CFA models to our data, we proceeded with model testing.

Ethical leadership moderates the cross-level effect of supervisor justice enactment (for a similar model, see: Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Chen, & Lowe, 2009). We tested for moderated mediation using a parametric bootstrap (Preacher, Zyphur, & Zhang, 2010), which uses a Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications to estimate bias-corrected confidence intervals for the conditional indirect effects using the parameters and standard errors from the analysis (e.g., Lanaj, Kim, Koopman, & Matta, 2018; Menges, Tussing, Wihler, & Grant, 2017; Wang, Liu, Liao, Gong, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Shi, 2013; Yue, Wang, & Groth, 2017).

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the study variables and Table 2 presents the results of our path analysis. As can be seen, employee justice perceptions were significantly associated with supervisor justice enactment ($\gamma = .27, p = .019$) and ethical leadership ($\gamma = .54, p = .000$). Hypothesis 1 predicted that ethical leadership would substitute for supervisor justice enactment, such that the effect of justice enactment would be weaker at high levels of ethical leadership. Supporting Hypothesis 1, this interaction was significant ($\gamma = -.16, p = .005$). Figure 1 depicts this relationship, and illustrates that the relationship between justice enactment and justice perceptions was significantly stronger at low levels of ethical leadership ($\gamma = .35, p = .004$) compared to high levels ($\gamma = .19, p = .095$).²

² The ethical leadership scale contains two items that overlap with justice: "My supervisor makes fair and balanced decisions" and "My supervisor listens to what employees have to say." We removed them from the scale and reanalyzed our data. Our results were unaffected. Similarly, one procedural justice item overlaps with ethical leadership: "Those procedures have upheld moral and ethical standards." We removed this item from both the employee and supervisor measures and reanalyzed our data. Our results were unaffected.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for and Correlations Among Focal Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Level 1 variables																	
1. Overall justice perceptions	3.88	.58															
2. Distributive justice perceptions	3.48	.96	.69*														
3. Procedural justice perceptions	3.73	.71	.87*	.48*													
4. Informational justice perceptions	3.94	.74	.81*	.33*	.60*												
5. Interpersonal justice perceptions	4.50	.63	.67*	.23*	.45*	.60*											
6. Ethical leadership	3.98	.57	.63*	.31*	.53*	.62*	.47*										
7. Interpersonally-directed citizenship	3.78	.57	.10*	.06	.07	.10*	.11*	.25*									
8. Organizationally-directed citizenship	3.74	.59	.31*	.21*	.28*	.25*	.19*	.35*	.47*								
9. Supervisor-directed resistance	1.17	.33	-.18*	-.04	-.14*	-.19*	-.20*	-.20*	-.14*	-.14*							
10. Supervisor-directed deviance	1.20	.30	-.15*	-.03	-.15*	-.14*	-.13*	-.11*	-.09*	-.15*	.58*						
11. Positive affect	3.61	.67	.44*	.29*	.34*	.39*	.32*	.40*	.16*	.45*	-.09*	-.09*					
Level 2 variables																	
12. Overall justice enactment	4.26	.40	.33*	.24*	.27*	.25*	.36*	.39*	.14*	.27*	-.16*	-.14*	.20*				
13. Distributive justice enactment	4.05	.81	.22*	.39*	.15*	.05	.19*	.19*	-.04	.20*	.09	.06	.08	.65*			
14. Procedural justice enactment	4.09	.57	.29*	.17*	.31*	.24*	.26*	.33*	.14*	.23*	-.11*	-.12*	.27*	.81*	.29*		
15. Informational justice enactment	4.29	.46	.17*	.00	.05	.26*	.27*	.32*	.15*	.09	-.22*	-.19*	.01	.71*	.28*	.41*	
16. Interpersonal justice enactment	4.71	.46	.20*	-.01	.18*	-.17*	.37*	.26*	.21*	.22*	-.33*	-.24*	.13	.62*	.14	.40*	.51*

Note. Level 1, $n = 541$ employees; Level 2, $n = 132$ supervisors. Level 1 variables were aggregated to Level 2 to present relationships with justice enactment and ethical leadership.

* $p < .05$.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 predicted moderated mediation, such that the relationship between justice enactment and (Hypothesis 2) citizenship behavior and (Hypothesis 3) counterproductive behavior via justice perceptions would be stronger at low levels of ethical leadership compared to high levels. As mentioned previously, we used two operationalizations for both citizenship and counterproductive behavior, and so we report results for each. Hypothesis 2 received mixed support. Employee justice perceptions were significantly associated with OCBO ($\gamma = .32, p = .000$), and the indirect effect was stronger at low levels of ethical leadership (indirect effect = .110, 95% confidence interval [CI [.036, .208]]) than at high levels (indirect effect = .060, 95% CI [-.008, .140]), and the difference was significant (difference = -.051, 95% CI [-.095, -.017]). For OCBI, in contrast, employee justice perceptions were not significantly associated with OCBI ($\gamma = .101, p = .055$), although this p value narrowly exceeded the conventional threshold value of .05. Despite this, the effect was still large enough that the pattern of results suggests significant moderated mediation. As predicted, the indirect effect was stronger at low levels of ethical leadership (indirect effect = .035, 95% CI [.004, .088]) than at high levels (indirect effect = .019, 95% CI [.000, .059]) and the difference was significant (difference = -.016, 95% CI: -.045, -.001).

Hypothesis 3 was supported for both operationalizations. Employee justice perceptions were significantly associated with both supervisor-directed resistance ($\gamma = -.10, p = .000$), and supervisor-directed deviance ($\gamma = -.08, p = .001$). For supervisor-directed resistance, the indirect effect was stronger at low levels of ethical leadership (indirect effect = -.035, 95% CI [-.073, -.011]) than at high levels (indirect effect = -.019, 95% CI [-.049, .001]), and the difference was significant (difference = .016, 95% CI [.005, .034]). For supervisor-directed deviance, the indirect effect was stronger at low levels of ethical leadership (indirect effect = -.026, 95% CI [-.058, -.007]) than at high levels (indirect effect = -.014, 95% CI [-.039, .001]), and the difference was significant (difference = .012, 95% CI [.003, .027]).

Discussion

The outcomes of employee justice perceptions have long been the focus of scholarly attention. This emphasis was critical to the development of this literature, and without this focus “it is difficult to conceive of how the literature could have grown as fast as it did” (Colquitt, 2012). The importance of employee justice perceptions is indisputable. Scholars thus turned their attention toward supervisors as justice actors (Colquitt, 2012). This research has been paradigm-shifting, but a component of this shift is an assumption—sometimes explicit, but often implicit—that supervisor justice enactment is largely synonymous with employee justice perceptions.

Earlier, we pointed out instances of this assumption being made explicit (e.g., authors referring to this relationship as “obvious”). Yet this assumption exists implicitly in other work as well. For example, Scott et al. (2007) framed their study around supervisor justice enactment, yet they measured employee justice perceptions (see also: Heslin & Vandewalle, 2011; Koopman et al., 2015). Cornelis, Van Hiel, De Cremer, and Mayer (2013) measured justice enactment, yet their discussion assumes that this enactment will translate to justice perceptions by employees (see also: Hoogervorst, De Cremer, & van Dijke, 2013; Scott, Garza, Conlon, & Kim, 2014). Our results on the “ethics-laden” nature of justice perceptions, particularly when combined with the results of Rodell et al. (2017) on the “affect-laden” nature of justice perceptions, illustrate an assumption in the justice literature in need of revision. If employee justice perceptions are, at times, not influenced by supervisor justice enactment, then this points to the need for theoretical exploration to identify why, and under what conditions, employees perceive more or less justice.

Theoretical Contributions and Future Research

Our research directly responds to a call from Barclay et al. (2017) to develop justice theory using an information-processing

Table 2
Table of Results

Variables	Employee justice perceptions		Organizationally-directed citizenship		Interpersonally-directed citizenship		Supervisor-directed resistance		Supervisor-directed deviance	
	γ	SE	γ	SE	γ	SE	γ	SE	γ	SE
Intercept	3.89*	.04	3.74*	.04	3.77*	.04	1.17*	.02	1.20*	.03
Supervisor justice enactment	.27*	.11	.23*	.11	.11	.10	-.09	.10	-.10	.09
Ethical leadership	.54*	.04	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Interaction	-.16*	.06	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>Controls</i>										
Positive affect	.19*	.04	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>Mediator</i>										
Employee justice perceptions	—	—	.32*	.05	.10	.06	-.10*	.03	-.08*	.02
R-squared	39%		4%		0%		3%		2%	
<i>Mediation and moderated mediation</i>										
Indirect effect	—		.085 <i>[.017, .170]</i>		.027 <i>[.003, .073]</i>		-.027 <i>[-.061, -.006]</i>		-.020 <i>[-.049, -.004]</i>	
Indirect effect (high ethical leadership)	—		.060 <i>[-.008, .140]</i>		.019 <i>[.000, .059]</i>		-.019 <i>[-.049, .001]</i>		-.014 <i>[-.039, .001]</i>	
Indirect effect (low ethical leadership)	—		.110 <i>[.036, .208]</i>		.035 <i>[.004, .088]</i>		-.035 <i>[-.073, -.011]</i>		-.026 <i>[-.058, -.007]</i>	
Indirect effect (difference)	—		-.051 <i>[-.095, -.017]</i>		-.016 <i>[-.045, -.001]</i>		.016 <i>[.005, .034]</i>		.012 <i>[.003, .027]</i>	

Note. Level 1, $n = 541$ employees; Level 2, $n = 132$ supervisors. For indirect and conditional indirect effects, we italicized confidence intervals and bolded those that exclude zero.
* $p < .05$.

lens. As these authors note, information-processing perspectives have the potential to increase our understanding of how employees form justice perceptions. Indeed, these authors proved prescient in their recommendations, as they specifically suggested that scholars consider “how automatic processes can create a context for the influence of controlled processes” (Barclay et al., 2017, p. 874). Our investigation follows their recommendation. In so doing, we not only contribute to the information-processing literature by highlighting how information from automatic processing can substitute for systematic processing, but we also open the door for other investigations in the justice literature. For example, might other supervisor behaviors substitute for justice? Although Rodell et al. (2017) examined the contribution of charismatic leadership to justice perceptions via affect, these authors did not consider a substitutive relationship with justice enactment. Overall, our investigation, and potential future examinations, lend credence to the “substitutes for justice hypothesis” advanced by Ullrich, Christ, and Van Dick (2009) and highlight that the relationship between justice enactment and justice perception may not be quite so obvious after all.

Relatedly, might supervisor characteristics reduce justice perceptions, even when supervisors do enact justice? Abusive supervision would seem to be one possibility (Tepper, 2007). A supervisor can enact justice (e.g., rewarding in proportion to contributions, allowing voice in procedures), yet also be classified as an abusive supervisor (e.g., invading privacy, breaking promises). Would this interaction lead to the opposite results to those presented in this article, where justice enactment is unable to compensate for abusive supervision? As people tend to weight the impact of negative behaviors higher (e.g., Taylor, 1991), this may be the case.

Our research also extends fairness heuristic theory (Lind, 2001). A central tenet of this theory is discrete justice experiences con-

tribute to overall justice perceptions that inform subsequent attitudes and behaviors. However, Lind (2001, p. 76) also suggests that “other cognitions” might have similar implications for the formation of justice perceptions. Ethical leadership may constitute such a cognition, and as such, may provide an alternative option for employees seeking to resolve the “fundamental social dilemma” whether to work toward the benefit of themselves, or toward the benefit of the group (Lind, 2001, p. 61). A point of note, however, is that to be effective at resolving this dilemma, such cognitions should be relatively stable (Lind, 2001). Recently, a number of articles have documented that leader behaviors (e.g., Lanaj, Johnson, & Lee, 2016; Rosen, Simon, Gajendran, Johnson, Lee, & Lin, 2019), as well as individual perceptions of those behaviors (e.g., Tepper et al., 2018) vary daily. Our position in this article that ethical leadership perceptions are still likely to be relatively stable because they go beyond the discrete actions of a person; indeed, the state of the science in this literature supports this position (e.g., Den Hartog, 2015). However, future research should examine the stability of ethical leadership perceptions or behaviors.

We also note that the information-processing mechanism we propose is not the only potential explanation for the correlations between supervisor justice enactment and employee justice perceptions we noted at the outset. One alternative could be that employees systematically process all of their supervisor’s justice acts, but simply see the world in a different way than their supervisor (e.g., the individuals could have differences in their belief in a just world; Lerner, 1980). This point is analogous to Matta et al.’s (2015) research on the relationship between employee and supervisor perceptions of LMX quality. Some of the mechanisms mentioned by these authors for differences in LMX quality perceptions could be relevant here as well (e.g., miscommunications or differing expectations). Future research could thus examine our pro-

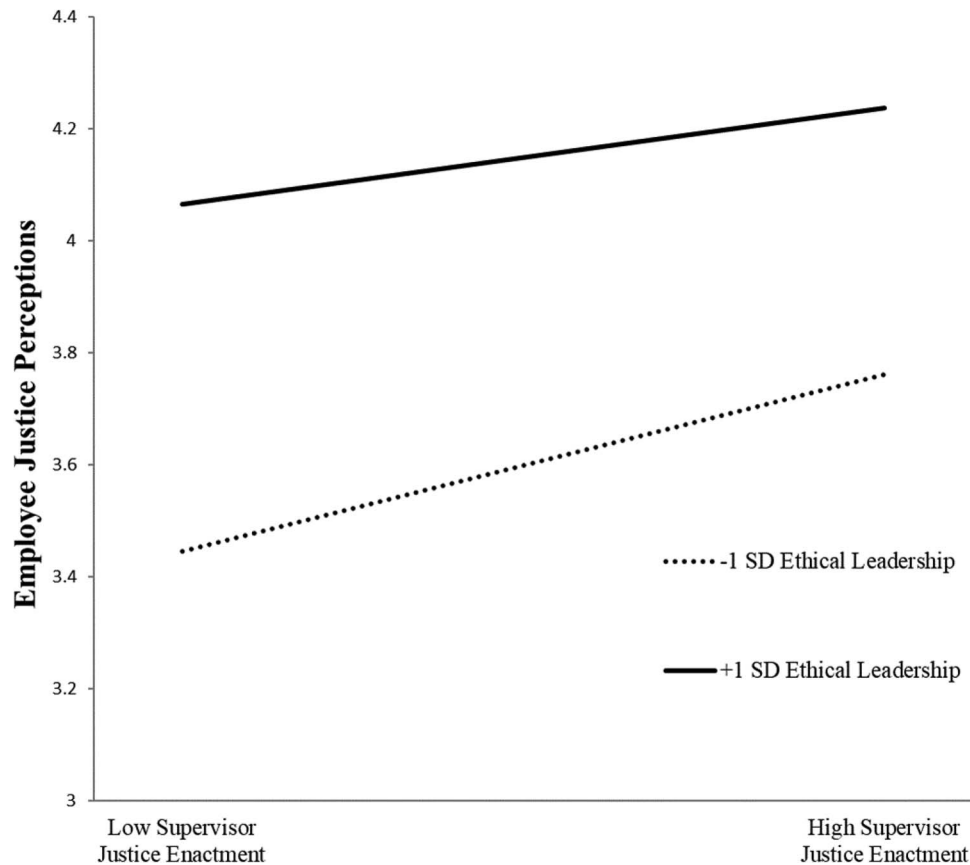


Figure 1. Interaction of justice enactment and ethical leadership predicting employee justice perceptions. Consistent with a substitution pattern, the relationship between justice enactment and justice perceptions is significantly stronger at low levels of ethical leadership ($\gamma = .35, p = .004$) compared to high levels ($\gamma = .19, p = .095$).

posed mechanism competitively with alternatives such as these. Another alternative is that some events could have disproportionate weighting in creating overall perceptions (Cropanzano et al., 2001). The effects of discrete events are difficult to capture with a design such as ours, however, an experience-sampling could examine this. This would allow researchers to view the relationship between supervisor justice enactment and employee justice perceptions over short time-periods where arguably fewer discrete justice events have occurred. This would also facilitate examining our previous point about the stability of ethical leadership perceptions.

Limitations

The results of our study provide general support for our hypotheses. Despite this, there are limitations that we should discuss. For example, employees self-reported their citizenship and counterproductive behavior. We acknowledge that this is a limitation, and our results should be interpreted accordingly. However, the linkage between justice perceptions and these constructs is well-established (Colquitt et al., 2013). Thus, this should not threaten the validity of our findings. Indeed, it is far more likely that our results reflect known relationships and not common method biases. Moreover, meta-analyses have argued in support of self-report

operationalizations for these constructs (Berry, Carpenter, & Barratt, 2012; Carpenter, Berry, & Houston, 2014).

In addition, supervisors reported their justice enactment while employees reported their perceptions of ethical leadership. We choose these operationalizations because our theory asserts that an employee's perception that a leader is ethical (which may not be synonymous with leader self-reports; Treviño et al., 2000) is what substitutes for justice enactment. An alternative would have been for supervisors to report their ethical leadership as well. Doing so however, would have been at odds with the construct definition (Brown et al., 2005), the theory we develop in this article as drawn from information processing (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004), as well as the vast majority of empirical work thus far (for meta-analyses, see Bedi, Alpaslan, & Green, 2016; Ng & Feldman, 2015). Yet, this is a notable limitation nonetheless.

Further, we observed a relatively strong bivariate relationship between justice perceptions and ethical leadership, raising reasonable concerns about common method bias. However, there are reasons to temper these concerns as they relate to our findings. First, artifactual inflation of correlations is unlikely to reflect an explanation for interaction effects (Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010) and indeed this may suggest a level of conservatism to our

results. Put differently, such a relationship does not threaten the validity of the interactive relationships upon which we base our contribution. Second, Mayer et al. (2012) observed the same phenomenon in their investigation of justice perceptions and ethical leadership. Yet, just as we did, these authors could still confirm the empirical distinguishability of these constructs through CFA. Moreover, high correlations are common in most research on leadership and justice. Justice perceptions are consistently strongly correlated (Colquitt et al., 2013), as are leadership constructs that scholars consider to be distinct (e.g., Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Shaffer, DeGeest, & Li, 2016). Overall, our results show that justice perceptions and ethical leadership are conceptually and empirically distinct, and despite their strong relationship, we find consistent support for our hypotheses.

A final limitation is supervisors reported their enactment of justice toward their overall workgroup, and not toward each employee. Because the justice scale contains 20 items, we were concerned about overburdening supervisors by obtaining separate reports for each employee. An alternative would be to obtain a measure of justice enacted toward a single employee. Such a design bears similarity to that of Rodell et al. (2017), although those authors obtained the report from a coworker. Thus, what their model gains in precision, it loses in scope (i.e., although their measure of justice enactment is employee-specific, Rodell and colleagues were unable to account for the multilevel nature of supervisor-employee relations). Yet, future research could implement a more nuanced design wherein supervisors report justice enactment toward each employee.

Conclusion

The logical, but until recently relatively untested, assumption in the justice literature is employee justice perceptions are “justice-laden.” However, recent research provides reason to question this. We provide evidence that justice is also “ethics-laden,” in that ethical leadership (a related yet distinct construct to justice) can substitute for supervisor justice enactment. Our results suggest theory, research, and practice would benefit from recognizing that adhering to justice rules is not necessarily the only way to ensure that employees feel justly treated.

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