

## CHAPTER 12

# EXPLORING THE “BLACK BOX” OF JUSTICE CLIMATE: WHAT MECHANISMS LINK JUSTICE CLIMATE AND OUTCOMES? ☆

David M. Mayer and Maribeth Kuenzi

### ABSTRACT

*Purpose – This chapter highlights that we do not know why justice climate is related to various unit outcomes and proposes a number of mechanisms.*

*Design/methodology/approach – This chapter draws on the extant literature on justice climate, organizational climate, and a number of theories to link justice climate to unit outcomes.*

*Findings – We have little understanding of the mechanisms linking justice climate to unit outcomes and it is important to consider various mechanisms.*

*Research limitations/implications – The primary limitation of this chapter is that although we present several ideas for future research, we do not provide any new empirical findings. The primary implications have to do with specifying the theoretical mechanisms responsible for the effects of justice climate on unit outcomes.*

☆ Both authors contributed equally to this chapter.

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Originality/value – *The novel aspect of this chapter is that it questions why justice climate is related to several disparate outcomes and tries to take a theoretical approach to uncover the mechanisms.*

A sizeable body of work on organizational justice has found that an individual's justice perceptions are related to important attitudinal and behavioral outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, trust, evaluations of authority, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), and performance (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). In the past decade, a new stream of research has emerged that examines justice at the group level, referred to as *justice climate* (see Colquitt, Zapata-Phelan, & Roberson, 2005; Li & Cropanzano, 2009; Rupp, Bashshur, & Liao, 2007a, for reviews). Justice climate refers to a shared group-level cognition regarding the extent to which group members are treated fairly and is typically operationalized as aggregate perceptions of justice across group members (Roberson & Colquitt, 2005). Given that organizations are increasingly utilizing team-based structures, the focus on justice at the group or team level is not only theoretically interesting but is also timely and relevant (Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003).

The seminal work in this area demonstrated that justice climate predicted individual-level outcomes above and beyond individual-level justice perceptions and that there was agreement in groups regarding the level of employees' justice (Mossholder, Bennett, & Martin, 1998; Naumann & Bennett, 2000). Subsequent empirical research has examined group-level outcomes of justice climate (Chen, Lam, Naumann, & Schaubroeck, 2005; Colquitt, Noe, & Jackson, 2002; Ehrhart, 2004; Moliner, Martínez-Tur, Peiró, Ramos, & Cropanzano, 2005; Naumann & Bennett, 2002; Simons & Roberson, 2003). Most of this research has found support for the link between justice climate and group-level outcomes although there are a few exceptions (Moliner et al., 2005; Naumann & Bennett, 2002). Indeed, in the past decade, over 25 empirical journal articles, theoretical journal articles, and book chapters have focused on justice climate. The journal articles have appeared in many of our top empirical (e.g., *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, and *Personnel Psychology*) and theoretical (e.g., *Academy of Management Review*) scholarly journals. In addition, Volume 6 of *Research in Multi-Level Issues* contained several chapters dedicated to justice climate (Ambrose & Schminke, 2007; Cropanzano, Li, & James,

2007; Rupp et al., 2007a, 2007b). The fact that this book focused on justice in groups and teams exemplifies the growing importance of taking a group or team approach to the study of justice.

Despite the growing interest in justice climate, it is perhaps surprising that we do not have a good understanding of *why* justice climate leads to important outcomes (see Chen et al., 2005; Naumann & Bennett, 2002; Simons & Roberson, 2003, for notable exceptions). Although scholars have done an excellent job of conceptualizing justice climate (Mossholder et al., 1998; Naumann & Bennett, 2000), theoretically and empirically examining how it emerges (Roberson, 2006a, 2006b; Roberson & Colquitt, 2005), and demonstrating individual-level (Ansari, Hung, & Aafaqi, 2007; Liao & Rupp, 2005; Mayer, Nishii, Schneider, & Goldstein, 2007; Mossholder et al., 1998; Naumann & Bennett, 2000; Spell & Arnold, 2007; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008; Wallace, Edwards, Mondore, & Finch, 2008; Yang, Mossholder, & Peng, 2007) and group-level (Chen et al., 2005; Colquitt et al., 2002; Ehrhart, 2004; Naumann & Bennett, 2002; Moliner et al., 2005; Simons & Roberson, 2003) outcomes of justice climate, we know relatively little about the *mechanisms* linking justice climate to outcomes of interest (see Chen et al., 2005; Naumann & Bennett, 2002; Simons & Roberson, 2003, for notable exceptions). At this stage of development in justice climate research, it is important to examine the theoretical mechanisms linking justice climate and outcomes.

In this vein, the primary goal of this chapter is to open up the “black box” of justice climate by describing a number of theoretical mechanisms that can help explain the effects of justice climate. In the next section, we briefly make the case that it is important to examine mediators of justice climate effects. In the following section, we highlight the scant research that has examined mediators of justice climate. Finally, we draw on four theories that can help explain justice climate effects with the ultimate goal of stimulating much needed research in this domain.

### **THE NEED FOR OPENING THE “BLACK BOX” OF JUSTICE CLIMATE EFFECTS**

As noted previously, a substantial literature on justice climate has emerged within the past decade (Colquitt et al., 2005; Li & Cropanzano, 2009; Rupp et al., 2007a). One intriguing aspect of this body of work is the breadth of group-level outcomes that have been examined. For example, justice climate has been linked to group-level *attitudes* (e.g., satisfaction with supervisor

and organizational commitment), *intentions* (e.g., intent to remain), *well-being* (e.g., burnout), *processes* (e.g., collective efficacy), *counterproductive work behavior* (e.g., absenteeism), *prosocial behavior* (e.g., OCB), and *performance* (e.g., task performance). Thus, justice climate is related to a wide variety of outcomes.

The approach in the justice climate literature is quite different than much of the organizational climate literature (Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009). Typically, in the organizational climate literature, the specific type of climate being examined is conceptually closely related to the outcome of interest. For example, service climate is linked to customer satisfaction (Schneider, Ehrhart, Mayer, Saltz, & Niles-Jolly, 2005), safety climate is related to accident rates and injuries (Clarke, 2006), and innovation climate is associated with creativity (Anderson & West, 1998).

Thus, in the justice climate literature, there appears to be a conceptual disconnect between the climate being examined and its relation to the outcomes. Complicating this issue is that to date little research on justice climate has examined mediators of justice climate effects – an important issue given that the link between justice climate and the outcomes is not as intuitive as for other types of climate. Given the lack of obvious conceptual symmetry between justice climate and the diversity of outcomes examined, we think it is especially important to highlight the theoretical mechanisms that may help explain justice climate effects. We first review the studies that have examined mediators and then discuss several theories that are useful for linking justice climate to group-level outcomes.

## **PRIOR RESEARCH EXAMINING MEDIATORS OF JUSTICE CLIMATE EFFECTS**

Although several studies have examined the relationship between justice climate and group-level outcomes (Chen et al., 2005; Colquitt et al., 2002; Ehrhart, 2004; Naumann & Bennett, 2002; Moliner et al., 2005; Simons & Roberson, 2003), there is a dearth of research examining the mechanisms that help explain the effects of justice climate. There are three notable exceptions.

Chen et al. (2005) studied 148 work teams of tellers in retail banks in Hong Kong. They found that group-level OCB mediated the relationship between procedural justice climate and group performance. Similarly, Naumann and Bennett (2002) studied 40 bank branches and found that

group-level helping mediated the relationship between procedural justice climate and group performance. These two studies find consistent support for OCB as a mediator of procedural justice climate effects.

Simons and Roberson (2003) examined mediators of justice climate effects on department- and store-level outcomes using a sample of 783 departments in 97 hotels. Unit-level affective commitment mediated the relationship between procedural justice climate and unit-level intent to remain and unit-level discretionary service behavior, and interpersonal justice climate was linked to unit-level intent to remain and unit-level discretionary behavior through unit-level affective commitment and unit-level satisfaction with supervisor. At the store level, procedural and interpersonal justice climate were linked to employee turnover through affective commitment, satisfaction with supervisor, and intent to remain. In addition, the procedural and interpersonal justice climate relationships with guest service satisfaction were mediated by affective commitment, satisfaction with supervisor, and discretionary service behavior. These three studies help link justice climate to unit- and store-level outcomes.

### MECHANISMS LINKING JUSTICE CLIMATE TO GROUP OUTCOMES

The aforementioned studies provide an excellent initial attempt to examine mechanisms that help explain justice climate effects. To bolster these existing studies, we highlight several theoretical frameworks to explain the mechanisms that link justice climate to various outcomes. We describe four such possibilities below (Fig. 1). For each theory, we first provide a brief overview of the theoretical framework. Next, we suggest how the theory can be related specifically to justice climate. In the final part,

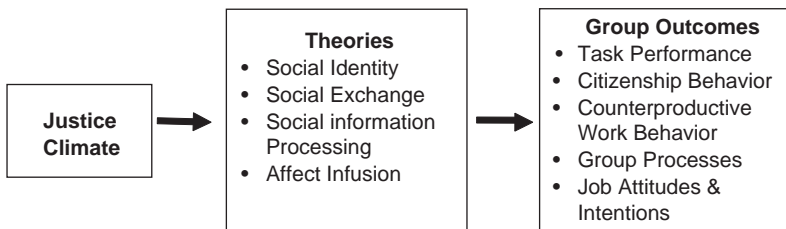


Fig. 1. Mechanisms for Justice Climate Effects.

we provide possible operationalizations of the theory that could be used to test the mechanisms described. These are a jumping-off point for researchers to start considering how to measure these mechanisms, rather than an all-inclusive list.

Before we start, a few caveats are in order. First, we focus on the link between justice climate and *group* outcomes such as group performance, group OCBs, and group deviance. Cross-level relationships between justice climate and individual outcomes do exist and are important, but, for the sake of parsimony, are not the focus of this chapter. Second, we do not make specific predictions linking justice climate to any particular outcomes. Rather, we focus on the general mechanisms that could be applied to various outcome variables. Third, we only examine the role of mean levels of justice climate (referred to as *justice climate level*) and do not focus on the variance in justice perceptions within a group, team, unit, or organization (referred to as *justice climate strength*; Colquitt et al., 2002; Roberson, 2006a). We focus on justice climate level to be parsimonious and also because justice climate strength makes more sense as a moderator of justice climate level and thus is less relevant to our examination of mediators of mean levels of justice within a group. Finally, we do not make differential predictions for the different justice climate dimensions or sources. There is limited support for the differential effects of the justice dimensions on outcomes (Colquitt et al., 2001) and we sought to be parsimonious in this chapter. In general, we think these mediators help explain the effects of multiple justice dimensions as well as overall justice climate. Again, this chapter is designed to provide some “food for thought” to start the dialog regarding mechanisms that link justice climate to group outcomes, not to provide a model of all possible levels of analysis, outcome variables, operationalizations, justice dimensions, and sources of justice. In what follows, we highlight four theories that can be used to link justice climate to group outcomes. We focus on these specific theories because they are influential theories within the organizational justice and organizational climate literatures that help explain why justice and climate relate to valuable outcomes.

### *Social Identity Theory*

#### *Theory Overview*

One theory that may be useful to help explain the effects of justice climate is social identity theory (SIT; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1974, 1975, 1978). Hogg and Terry (2000, p. 121) describe social identity as “how the self is

defined by group membership and how social cognitive processes associated with group membership-based self-definition produce characteristically 'groupy' behavior." SIT focuses on the ways in which individuals perceive and categorize themselves, based on their social identities. It seeks to answer the question, "Who are we?"

SIT has two primary components: categorization and comparison. Self-categorization occurs when individuals believe that they belong to a specific group or social category. This categorization accentuates perceived similarities between the self and the other group members. Then individuals use social comparison to evaluate their in-group with out-group categorizations. This comparison process allows individuals to focus on dimensions that will enhance the group so that they can be judged positively.

Individuals obtain a particular social identity by being a member of a group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group perspective. When individuals belong to the same group, they will hold similar perceptions, and these perceptions are then mutually reinforced. Group identity influences members in the group such that they perceive their fate as intermixed with the group's fate. A process of depersonalization occurs and individuals act in accordance to the norms of the group (Terry & Hogg, 1996). This process serves to enhance their identification with the group that can in turn increase their self-esteem (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

### *Social Identity Theory and Justice Climate*

Theory and research at the individual level make the link between justice and identity. For example, the group-value model (Lind & Tyler, 1988), relational model (Tyler & Lind, 1992), and group engagement model (Tyler & Blader, 2003) all highlight how fair treatment makes an employee feel like a valued and trusted member of a group (see Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001, for a review). This increased acceptance within the group leads to identifying with the group and subsequently acting in ways that support the group.

We believe these identity processes occur at the group level as well. When employees in a work group are all treated fairly, they are more likely to develop a shared sense of identification with the group. They are more likely to act as a cohesive unit and derive a collective sense of self-esteem from being a part of the group. Thus, social identity processes are expected to occur at the group level and serve as a mechanism linking justice climate to group outcomes.

It should be noted that although we view social identity as a mediator of justice climate effects, it is possible that the relationship runs in the reverse order. Indeed, social identity could drive perceptions of justice climate. For example, if a group has a strong sense of connection and cohesion (i.e., a strong social identity), they may care more about how others in the group are treated and this can influence mean levels of justice climate in the group. In other words, when people integrate the group into their self-concept, they are likely to integrate injustices suffered by other in-group members into their own perceptions of justice, and thus, a shared sense of justice is likely to emerge. Thus, although we examine social identity as a mediator of justice climate effects, a case can be made that the causal order can run in the opposite direction.

#### *Possible Ways to Operationalize Social Identity*

One way to measure social identity is to assess *group identification* (Mael & Tetrick, 1992). Researchers could also examine *commitment to the group* as a proxy for social identity. One way to do this is to adapt Meyer and Allen's (1997) affective commitment measure to the group level. A final possibility is to measure *group cohesion* (see Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003, for research on group cohesion) as a way of examining social identity. All of these constructs highlight how having a sense of closeness, connection, and identity from one's group could help explain the relationship between the justice climate and the group outcomes.

### *Social Exchange Theory*

#### *Theory Overview*

Social exchange theory (SET; Blau, 1964) provides another theoretical mechanism linking justice climate and outcomes. SET stipulates that certain workplace antecedents lead to interpersonal connections, referred to as exchange relationships (Cropanzano et al., 2001). SET posits that behavior stems from an exchange process where individuals weigh the benefits and risks of these social relationships.

Blau (1964) suggests that there are two broad classes of exchanges that can occur in the workplace: economic and social exchanges. Both of these exchanges involve a series of interactions that invoke an obligation. Economic exchanges are more short-lived, quid pro quo relationships that typically involve a more tangible resource. Social exchanges tend to have a



longer term focus and can often involve more intangible resources such as esteem or recognition.

In social exchange relationships, there are “rules” of exchange that individuals follow to guide the exchange process. The most common rule that has been examined in the management literature is the rule of *reciprocity*. Here, individuals feel obligated for various reasons to reciprocate positive (negative) behavior in positive (negative) exchanges. Thus, when an individual receives favorable treatment, she/he is obligated to reciprocate by engaging in behaviors that are beneficial to the source of the positive treatment.

#### *Social Exchange Theory and Justice Climate*

Social exchange relationships evolve when employers “take care of employees,” which thereby engenders beneficial consequences. In other words, the social exchange relationship is a mediator or intervening variable between fair (unfair) behaviors and positive (negative) actions in the group. There is a considerable amount of research examining social exchange as a mediator of justice effects at the individual level (see Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Susan Taylor, 2000, for an example). We expect social exchange processes to operate at the group level as well. Specifically, when group members have a shared perception of fair treatment, the work group will feel obligated to reciprocate by engaging in behaviors that benefit their supervisor, work group, and organization. Furthermore, when the group feels fairly treated, it is more willing to sacrifice on the behalf of the collective and less likely to engage in acts of deviance.

#### *Possible Ways to Operationalize Social Exchange*

One way to measure social exchange at the group level would be to measure the exchange relationships between leaders and employees in the form of *leader–member exchange* (LMX; Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975) at the group level as well as the exchange relationships between coworkers in a workgroup or perceptions of *team–member exchange* (TMX; Seers, 1989). A second way to measure social exchange as a mediator is to focus on *trust*. Trust is proposed to be an important mechanism linking justice to outcomes at the individual level. One possibility would be to adapt a measure of trust such as the one developed by Mayer and Davis (1999) to the group level. A third way to operationalize social exchange is to measure perceived supervisor support and perceived organizational support at the group level (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002). When members of a work group have a shared perception of fair treatment,

they are more likely to feel supported and thus will reciprocate by engaging in behaviors that help one's supervisor, group, and organization.

### *Social Information Processing Theory*

#### *Theory Overview*

Social information processing theory (SIPT; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) posits that individuals working in the same work environment will be exposed to the same cues such as leaders and other contextual characteristics. Individuals are influenced by the activities of those around them. They look to the actions of others to inform their thinking about what is important, appropriate, and likely to be rewarded, and what behaviors are not. The information available in their immediate work context is used to interpret events and to develop expectations about the appropriate behavior and the consequences of behavior. Individuals use this information from others in their immediate work context to form judgments about organizational activities.

We argue based on SIPT that climate affects the salience of the environmental cues and thus perceptions of how people should be treated (i.e., norms for appropriate behavior). Salancik and Pfeffer (1978), in their seminal piece on social information processing, suggest that the critical issue of climate "is the consistency or unanimity with which persons define the situation, and the forcefulness with which they maintain such shared meanings. Thus, the SIPT approach would define climate in terms of the shared perceptions of what attitudes and needs are appropriate, the shared definitions of jobs and work environments, and the definitions or how people should relate to that environment." Thus, employees will look to how they are treated by management to determine what behavior is appropriate and acceptable behavior within their work group.

#### *Social Information Processing Theory and Justice Climate*

Unlike in the prior two sections, the individual-level justice literature rarely examines social information processing as a mediator of justice climate effects. This is perhaps surprising given that the original conceptualization of SIPT focused on individuals in organizations. Although a dearth of attention has been dedicated to integrating SIPT and justice (see Roberson, 2006a, for an exception), this theory is highly relevant for linking justice climate to group outcomes. When justice climate is high, work group employees receive the message that treating people in positive ways is the

norm and the appropriate way to behave. In contrast, when justice climate is low, the norm being communicated is that treating others in a considerate manner is not highly valued. Thus, justice climate influences awareness (and in some cases, internalization) of the norms of the work group, and the desire to behave consistently with the norms influences the group’s behavior.

#### *Possible Ways to Operationalize Social Information Processing*

There are few established measures that are useful for linking justice climate to the group outcomes through social information processing mechanisms. The best strategy for future research is to develop a measure that taps the shared norms employees in a work group perceive regarding how others should be treated. Justice climate should increase work group norms for appropriate treatment of others, and the perceptions of such norms should mediate the effects of justice climate. Developing a measure of justice-related norms at the group level would be a useful addition to the organizational justice literature and allow for a test of social information processing as a mediator of justice climate effects.

### *Affect Infusion Model*

#### *Theory Overview*

Finally, features in the work environment can have an indirect effect on outcomes through not only cognitive reactions but also affective reactions. The affect infusion model (AIM) provides an explanation for how a mood can influence the ability to process information. Forgas (1995, p. 39) defines affect infusion as “the process whereby affectively loaded information exerts an influence on and becomes incorporated into the judgmental process, entering into the judge’s deliberations and eventually coloring the judgmental outcome.” The model suggests that affect influences not only what people think but also how people process information and ultimately react behaviorally.

According to the AIM, affective states influence behaviors and judgment depending on the information processing strategies that individuals use. Tasks that require more processing will tend to be more influenced by affect than those that require less elaborate processing. The AIM has been shown to affect judgments, decision-making, and behaviors in organizations (see Forgas & George, 2001, for a review). For instance, positive moods have been shown to promote prosocial behaviors (George, 1991). In addition,

affect or moods can influence cognitive processes by affecting how events are interpreted as well as what information is attended to.

Although AIM has primarily focused on the effects of individual-level mood, researchers have shown that groups can also have moods or an affective tone. By group affective tone (GAT), we mean the “consistent or homogenous affective reactions within a group” (George, 1990, p. 108). Indeed, Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) suggest that group members can experience similar moods if they are exposed to the same affective events. Specific work events will lead to emotional reactions by the group that in turn affect the behaviors and attitudes of the group. In this vein, GAT mediates the relationship between the work environment and the group outcomes.

#### *Affect Infusion Model and Justice Climate*

We posit that justice climate influences the affective tone of the group and that in turn results in positive (negative) behaviors to support (harm) the group. For instance, a negative justice climate is an adverse working condition, which contributes to the team’s negative experiences, which ultimately adversely influences team performance and attitudes. Consistent with research at the individual level examining affect as a mediator of justice effects (De Cremer, 2007), we think it is likely that affective tone will mediate the relationship between justice climate and group outcomes. When employees in a group have a shared perception of being treated fairly, the mood of the group will be improved and subsequently more prosocial behaviors will be exhibited by the group. In contrast, in a group that has members who have a shared perception that they are treated unfairly, the negative affective tone of the group is likely to increase and group members are more likely to engage in undesirable behaviors.

#### *Possible Ways to Operationalize Affect Infusion*

There are several ways that group moods can be operationalized. A measure for GAT exists in the literature. George (1990) aggregated individual measures of affect to measure GAT. Totterdell (2000) examined team or *collective moods* by asking individuals to rate the team mood using a bipolar adjective checklist (he used the UMACL by Matthews, Jones, & Chamberlain, 1990). Researchers have also examined *emotional contagion* by having third-party observers rate group emotions. For example, Barsade (2002) had observers rate videotapes of group interactions during an experimental situation. Finally, researchers could examine the *affective climate* within a work group (e.g., Tse, Dasborough, & Ashkanasy, 2008) as a way to measure affect in the group.

### Summary

In sum, in this section, we briefly described four theories (e.g., social identity, social exchange, social information processing, and affect infusion) that should prove useful as a starting point for examining mediators of justice climate effects. Clearly, more nuanced predictions linking various dimensions and sources of justice climate to different outcomes at multiple levels could (and hopefully will) emerge from our more general conceptual model. We hope that by briefly describing the theory, the processes that should link justice climate to outcomes, and potential ways for operationalizing the mediating processes, our chapter will be useful for justice scholars interested in understanding why justice climate has such a powerful effect on various outcomes.

## CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, there is considerable interest in justice climate as evidenced by the sizeable literature that has emerged over the past decade. Although the field has developed rapidly, in this chapter, we argued that it is critical for the next phase of research on justice climate to begin to examine *why* justice climate is related to valuable outcomes. We hope this chapter stimulates research exploring the “black box” of justice climate effects. We believe it is important to develop a better understanding of the theoretical mechanisms that underlie justice climate effects for this area of research to continue to flourish.

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