

# Association Between Distributive and Procedural Justice and Life Satisfaction Among Correctional Staff: Research Note

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Distributive justice and procedural justice, two dimensions of organizational justice, have been found to be important workplace variables in shaping correctional staff job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. It is unclear, however, whether distributive justice and procedural justice are associated with correctional staff life satisfaction. Multivariate analysis of survey data from correctional staff at a state prison found that staff perceptions of both distributive justice and procedural justice had significant positive relationships with a measure of life satisfaction.

**Key Words:** Correctional staff • prison staff • life satisfaction • distributive justice • procedural justice • organizational justice

U.S. correctional facilities require substantial monetary resources to operate, spending more than 30 billion dollars annually to house about 1.5 million offenders. The largest expenditure, though, is for staff. More than 430,000 people work in U.S. correctional facilities (Maguire, 2010). While staff account for the largest expense in the correctional budget, they are also the institution's most important asset. Just as staff affect the operations of correctional facilities, so, too, the work environment affects staff. A small but growing body of literature has found that organizational justice in the form of distributive justice and procedural justice are significant predictors of job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment among correctional staff (Lambert, 2003; Lambert, Hogan, & Griffin, 2007; Taxman & Gordon, 2009). There is, however, much still unexplored on the relationships of distributive justice and procedural justice with other outcomes among correctional staff, including life satisfaction; therefore, this preliminary study examined the association between

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these two dimensions of organizational justice and life satisfaction among 272 staff members at a state run prison in the midwest.

### Brief Literature Review

Organizational justice is based on employee perceptions that the organization treats workers in a fair and just manner (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg, 1987). While organizational justice is a multidimensional concept, distributive justice and procedural justice are the two salient dimensions of organizational justice (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg, 1987, 1990b). Distributive justice deals with the perceptions that organizational outcomes affecting employees are equitable and fairly based (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg, 1982). In a sense, perceptions of distributive justice are based on the exchange principle: employees evaluate the organizational outputs they receive compared with their inputs to determine whether it is a fair outcome (Lambert, 2003). A wide array of outcomes shape employee perceptions, including pay, performance evaluations, assignments, rewards, and punishments (Greenberg, 1990a, 1990b). Procedural justice refers to employee perceptions that the process by which distributive outcomes are determined is fair (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg, 1990a). Employees generally desire the process to be open and fair, regardless of the outcome. Distributive justice deals with perceptions of the ends and procedural justice deals with perceptions of the means.

A small body of research has found that both forms of organizational justice are important predictors of correctional staff outcomes. These studies have found distributive justice and procedural justice associated with increased job satisfaction and organizational commitment among correctional staff (Lambert, 2003; Lambert et al., 2007). Additionally, both forms of justice have been linked with decreased job stress and job burnout (Lambert, Hogan, & Allen, 2006; Lambert et al., 2007; Lambert, Hogan, Jiang, Elechi, Benjamin, Morris, Laux, & Dupuy, 2010). In another study, perceptions of procedural justice were associated with lowered fear of being victimized at work (Taxman & Gordon, 2009). Not all possible correctional staff outcomes have been fully studied. Only one study has examined the relationship of distributive justice and procedural justice with correctional staff life satisfaction. In a single study of staff at a private correctional facility for juvenile offenders, both distributive justice and procedural justice were associated with life satisfaction (Lambert et al., 2010). There is a need for additional studies to determine whether the findings can be replicated.

Life satisfaction is an individual's cognitive assessment of the degree of overall satisfaction with his or her life (Hart, 1999; Quinn & Staines, 1979). Life satisfaction is important not only for staff but for correctional facilities as well (Lambert et al., 2010). Staff who are happy and satisfied with life tend to be more pleasant to work with, more open, less stressed, and more helpful (Donovan & Halpern, 2002; Lambert, Hogan, Paoline, & Baker, 2005).

Based on the spillover theory, what occurs at work can spill over and affect the overall quality of life for people because work is a major domain in the lives of most working adults (Steiner & Truxillo, 1989; Wilensky, 1960). High perceptions of organizational justice can provide people with positive feelings while low perceptions of organizational justice can cause negative feelings, such as frustration, anger, and resentment (Cropanzano, Goldman, & Benson, 2005; Judge & Colquitt, 2004; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Lucas, 2009). The positive feelings from perceptions that there is distributive justice and procedural justice at work are likely to help increase the satisfaction with life overall. Likewise, negative feelings can spill over to cause strain, conflict, and stress for the person not only at work but at home. In the end, this may lower the person's level of life satisfaction. It was, therefore, hypothesized that both distributive justice and procedural justice would have a positive relationship with correctional staff life satisfaction.

## Methods

### *Participants*

All the staff at a midwestern state maximum security prison that housed 1,000 long-term inmates were surveyed.<sup>1</sup> Of the 400 surveys administered, 272 were completed and returned, resulting in a response rate of 68%. The survey was voluntary and anonymous. Staff who responded seemed representative of the entire staff population at the facility. Among the participants, about 76% were male, 81% were White, and 50% were correctional officers. Of the total prison staff, about 77% were male, 86% were White, and 53% were correctional officers. Additionally, the human resource office at the prison estimated that the median age was 45 and the average tenure at the facility was approximately 10 years, which is similar to that of the participants whose median age was 44 and median tenure was 9 years.

*Measures*

Life satisfaction, the dependent variable in this study, was measured by using two items from Quinn and Staines (1979), which have been used in numerous life satisfaction studies. The two measures are an assessment of people's judgment of the overall level of satisfaction of their lives (see Table 1 for the specific items).

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	Description	Min	Max	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender	76% male (coded 1) 24% female (coded 0)	0	1	1	0.76	0.43
Age	Measured in continuous years	20	61	44	42.54	8.32
Position	50% CO (coded 1) 50% NonCO (coded 0)	0	1	0.5	0.50	0.50
Tenure	Years at the prison	0	26	9	9.64	6.81
Educational Level	41% college degree (coded 1) 59% no college degree (coded 0)	0	1	0	0.41	0.49
Race	82% White (coded 1) 18% Nonwhite (coded 0)	0	1	1	0.82	0.39
Perceived Distributive Justice	2-item additive index, $\alpha = 0.73$ 1. My last performance rating presented a fair and accurate picture of my actual job performance. Factor loading score = 0.73 2. The evaluation of my performance at this prison has been fair and objective. Factor loading score = 0.75	2	10	8	7.22	2.99

Table 1 *continued*

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics* (cont.)

Variable	Description	Min	Max	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Perceived Procedural Justice	3-item additive index , $\alpha = 0.84$ 1. In this agency, promotions are seldom related to employee performance (reverse coded). Factor loading score = 0.79 2. Promotions are more related to whom you know rather than the quality of work (reverse coded). Factor loading score = 0.81 3. There is a fair opportunity to be promoted at this agency. Factor loading score = 0.74	3	15	8	7.88	2.88
Perceived Life Satisfaction	2-item additive index , $\alpha = 0.87$ 1. Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are with your life? Factor loading score = 0.94 2. In general, how satisfying do you find the ways you're spending your life these days? Factor loading score = 0.94	2	6	4	4.11	1.09

*Note.* Min = minimum value, Max = maximum value, *Mdn* = median value, *M* = mean value, *SD* = standard deviation, CO = correctional officer. The items used to create the index appear in the description column. Staff responded to procedural and distributive justice items by using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (coded 1) to strongly agree (coded 5). The response options for the first life satisfaction item were: not too happy (coded 1), happy (coded 2), and very happy (coded 3). The response options for the second life satisfaction item were: not too satisfying (coded 1), satisfying (coded 2), and very satisfying (coded 3).

*N* = 272

$\alpha$  = Cronbach's internal reliability alpha value

The two independent variables of interest were distributive justice and procedural justice. As indicated previously, distributive justice deals with many different organizational outcomes, including performance evaluations. Most employees expect performance evaluations to be fair and represent actual work inputs and efforts (Joy & Witt, 1992; Lambert, 2003). This study measured perceptions of distributive justice with two items that asked staff about the accuracy and fairness of performance evaluations (see Table 1 for the specific items). Procedural justice covers a wide array of organizational procedures used to arrive at salient organizational outcomes that affect employees such as procedures for promotions. Most employees want a fair process for promotions (Lambert, 2003; Robbins, Summers, Miller, & Hendrix, 2000). This study measured perceptions of procedural justice with three items that asked staff about just and fair promotional procedures (see Table 1 for the specific items). The survey items for life satisfaction, distributive justice, and procedural justice were pilot tested with a group of correctional staff, including supervisors.

Respondent personal characteristics of gender, age, position, tenure, educational level, and race were also included (see Table 1).

## Results

Descriptive statistics for the variables this study used appear in Table 1. There was significant variation in both the dependent and independent variables (i.e., none was a constant). Based on various statistical tests, the variables were normally distributed and there were no problems with skewness or kurtosis. The distributive justice, procedural justice, and life satisfaction indexes comprise items created by means of factor analysis with the principal components method. The items loaded on the predicted factor, and the factor loading scores were above 0.70 (see Table 1 for the specific factor loading scores). The Cronbach alpha internal reliability values for all the indexes were above 0.70 (see Table 1 for specific values).

A multivariate analysis was conducted by using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression with life satisfaction as the dependent variable; the results appear in Table 2. Based on the Variance Inflation Factor scores (not reported) and Tolerance statistics (not reported), collinearity and multicollinearity were not a problem. About 22% of the variance was explained for the dependent variable. Among the personal characteristics, age and educational level had statistically significant associations with life satisfaction. Age had a negative association and educational level had a positive

association. Both distributive justice and procedural justice had a significant positive relationship with life satisfaction.

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Results With Life Satisfaction as the Dependent Variable

Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	t-value
Gender	-.23	.16	-.09	-1.44
Age	-.02	.01	-.13	-1.96*
Position	.18	.14	.08	1.25
Tenure	.02	.01	.10	1.40
Educational Level	.30	.14	.14	2.15*
Race	-.33	.17	-.12	-1.92
Perceived Distributive Justice	.09	.04	.14	2.13*
Perceived Procedural Justice	.07	.02	.18	2.74**
R-Squared	.22**	F = 4.06	df = 8, 250	

*Note.* B = unstandardized regression slope, SE = standard error of the slope,  $\beta$  = standardized regression slope. Gender was coded as female = 0 and male = 1. Age was measured in continuous years. Position was coded as non-correctional officer = 0 and correctional officer = 1. Tenure was measured in years working at the prison. Educational level was coded as no college degree = 0 and college degree = 1. Race was coded as Nonwhite = 0 and White = 1. Perceptions of Distributive Justice, Procedural Justice, and Life Satisfaction are additive indexes (see Table 1 for the items used to create these indexes).

N = 272

\*  $p \leq .05$     \*\*  $p \leq .01$

### Brief Discussion and Conclusion

Both hypotheses were supported. Among the correctional staff surveyed, both distributive justice and procedural justice related positively to satisfaction with life. This provides support for the contention that what happens at work can affect staff members in every aspect of their lives. Staff members' perception that there is organizational justice probably allows them to have more positive feelings toward

work and less stress, which can lead to greater life satisfaction. Conversely, perceptions of a low organizational fairness probably lead to frustration, anger, and resentment, which causes strain and stress in the life of the employee, resulting in decreased satisfaction with life overall. It is important to point out that organizational justice is arguably at the heart of the legitimacy of an organization (Greenberg, 1990b; Lincoln & Kalleberg, 1990; Taxman & Gordon, 2009). It is hard to work for an organization that is perceived to be unfair, unjust, and lacking integrity. Doing so may result in emotions that lower the quality of life.

While not the focus of the current study, age and educational level had significant associations with correctional staff life satisfaction. As age increased, life satisfaction decreased. It could be that as staff age, their health declines. Research has found that health problems are associated with lower life satisfaction. It could also be that age represents an accumulation of strains and frustrations over time from a wide variety of sources, and these strains and frustrations decrease the level of satisfaction with life (Lambert et al., 2010). Those with a college degree were on average more satisfied with their lives than those staff without a college degree. A college degree may provide long-term satisfaction by representing a goal that has been accomplished or simply that it resulted in higher pay for the person. Indirectly, it may also enhance coping skills to deal with stress and frustration from the workplace.

Although this study supports a prior study that looked at private prison staff (Lambert et al., 2010), it is not without limitations. It was a study of staff at a single midwestern state prison. The study needs to be replicated with other staff to compare findings. While the findings suggest that distributive justice and procedural justice are related positively to life satisfaction, it cannot be stated that they cause it. The data this study used were cross-sectional, and, as such, the study cannot demonstrate empirically that both forms of organizational justice lead directly to correctional staff life satisfaction. In addition, other possible outcome areas (e.g., absenteeism, organizational citizenship behaviors, increased union support, psychological withdrawal from work, etc.) need to be studied. More detailed measures for perceptions of distributive justice and procedural justice should be used. In this study, the distributive justice and procedural justice indexes were limited (i.e., measured by using two and three items, respectively) and focused on specific areas (i.e., performance evaluations and promotional procedures, respectively).

In closing, as staff are the driving force of correctional facilities, it is important to understand how perceptions of the work environment affect them. Some areas that



have not been fully studied are the relationships between distributive and procedural justice and life satisfaction. Among the surveyed staff at a maximum security state prison in the midwest, both distributive and procedural justice had a positive relationship with life satisfaction. It is hoped that this study will spark continued interest in the effects of organizational justice in correctional facilities.

#### Note

1. The data set used in this study has also been used in other studies. The survey was 16 pages with 221 questions, which covered a wide array of work environment dimensions and issues. The authors have used the data from this survey in other papers; however, none of the aforementioned papers examined the effect of distributive and procedural justice on the life satisfaction of correctional staff. The full citations of previous papers are available on request.

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