CHAPTER

17 Fairness Heuristic Theory, the Uncertainty Management Model, and Fairness at Work

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Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of Fairness Heuristic Theory and the Uncertainty Management Model as they endeavor to answer the questions of when and why employees are likely to attend to fairness in the workplace. Emphasis is given to the implications of these theoretical perspectives for workplace manager–report (and leader–follower) interactions and for organizational policies. We conclude the chapter with a discussion of how these theories relate to perspectives emerging from System Justification Theory on how people construct fairness judgments and when they may be more or less likely to attend to fairness in the workplace.

Key Words: Fairness Heuristic Theory, Uncertainty Management Model, System Justification Theory, organizational policies, manager-report interactions, leader-follower interactions, attention to fairness

Decades of research on organizational justice have demonstrated that fairness in the workplace is immensely important to people. Employees respond very positively to work situations they deem to be fair and react very negatively to work situations they deem unfair (e.g., Adams, 1965; Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; Weiss, Suckow, Cropanzano, 1999). Consequently, workplace fairness, or lack thereof, predicts a multitude of employee attitudes and behaviors (see generally Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992).

Perceiving one's organization to be fair and just has been demonstrated to have a variety of desirable consequences, including higher job satisfaction (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg, 1982; McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992), greater organizational commitment (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Korsgaard, Schweiger, & Sapienza, 1995; Moorman, 1991) and increased acceptance of workplace policies (Greenberg, 1994, 2000; Greenberg & Scott, 1996). Employees who judge their workplace to be fair engage in more organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) (Karriker & Williams, 2009; Konovsky & Folger 1991; Podsakoff & McKenzie, 1993), exhibit higher job performance (Colquitt, Noe, & Jackson, 2002; Lind, Kanfer, & Early, 1990) and are less likely to quit (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Simons & Roberson, 2003).

Conversely, perceptions of organizational unfairness or injustice have been linked to several undesirable outcomes, including decreased cooperation and less obedience toward authority figures (Huo, Smith, Tyler, & Lind, 1996; Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, & de Vera Park, 1993), increased absenteeism and turnover (Alexander & Ruderman, 1987; De Boer, Bakker, Syroit, Schaufeli, 2002) and lack of organizational citizenship behaviors (Moorman, Nieghood, & Organ, 1993; Niehoff & Moorman, 1993). Moreover, employees who believe their treatment in the workplace to be unfair are more likely to participate in counterproductive work behaviors (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001), steal from their workplace (Greenberg, 1990; 1993), engage in workplace

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violence (Dietz, Robinson, Folger, Baron, & Schulz, 2003; Folger & Baron, 1996), and sue their organization (Lind, Greenberg, Scott, & Welchans, 2000).

The powerful effect of fairness on workplace attitudes and behavior has led to the development of a substantial literature on the psychology of justice in organizations. Much of the classic research on organizational justice focused on exploring the consequences of perceptions of fairness and unfairness (see, e.g., Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992) and on distinctions between distributive, procedural, and interactive justice experiences (Ambrose & Arnaud, 2005; Bies, 2005; Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2001; Folger, 1977; Thibaut & Walker, 1975, 1978). More recently, some scholars have directed their attention toward answering the question of *when* fairness is likely to matter more to people and when it is likely to matter less. As we have sought to understand *when* fairness matters, we have also found ourselves giving substantial consideration to the question of *why* judgments of how fair or unfair one's treatment or outcomes are have such a robust effect on so many aspects of organizational life.

The goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of two related theoretical works—Fairness Heuristic Theory (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos, Lind, & Wilke, 2001) and the Uncertainty Management Model (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos, 2001a; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) as they endeavor to answer these questions. We focus on the implications of these theoretical perspectives for leader–follower interactions in the workplace and for organizational policies. We then discuss these theories in relation to perspectives emerging from System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), which also provide insight into when people may be more or less likely to attend to organizational justice.

Fairness Heuristic Theory

Fairness Heuristic Theory (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos, Lind, & Wilke, 2001) seeks to provide a coherent account of *when* and *why* people form and use fairness judgments. In doing so, the theory also describes *how* people's beliefs about the fairness of a given context are psychologically constructed.

The Fairness Heuristic

A central tenet of Fairness Heuristic Theory is its conceptualization of fairness in terms of cognitions, focusing specifically on how subjective *beliefs* about organizational fairness drive key workplace attitudes and behaviors. According to this theory, employees adopt early, relatively quickly formulated judgments about the fairness of a given work context and incorporate these judgments into an overall evaluation of the fairness of their work situation, which they then use as a heuristic or cognitive shortcut to guide their behavior and interpretation of subsequent fairness-relevant information in that context. This *fairness heuristic* is also used to regulate their emotional involvement at work. One important implication of this is that rather than constantly scanning their environment for new fairness-related information, people heavily draw from their early workplace experiences to construct a general impression of how fair their organization is. Thus, newly hired employees, or those recently transferred to a new team or department, are likely to use information available during early interactions with coworkers and authority figures to form a stable global fairness judgment about their new work environment.

In suggesting *when* people are most likely to form their beliefs about whether a context is fair or not, Fairness Heuristic Theory proposes a multiphase process through which people construct, then use, and then re-construct their fairness judgments. Early workplace experiences (or, as we will note later, experiences following an exceptional event that triggers re-evaluation of the fairness heuristic) constitute the "judgment phase" of fairness cognition process. Once an initial fairness assessment has been formulated, people tend to use this judgment, more or less uncritically, as a heuristic to guide their subsequent workplace reactions and evaluations. Fairness Heuristic Theory calls this second period of time the "use phase." In this phase, the global fairness judgment, if positive, facilitates trust, engagement, and acceptance of authority in everyday work life. Feelings of fairness enable the person to cooperate and identify with their team or organization, whereas feelings of unfairness block this type of psychological engagement and instead prompt a strict quid-pro-quo approach to responding to requests. According to the initial statement of the theory, the use phase persists until there is a striking change or inconsistency that makes it clear that "all bets are off." Certain environmental changes (phase shifting events) may trigger a reassessment of the cognitive shortcut that the fairness heuristic supplies and may provoke the person to recalibrate by seeking out new fairness information and constructing a new fairness heuristic to rely on

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in later decisions about how much to cooperate or engage.

Thus Fairness Heuristic Theory introduced two novel theoretical ideas. First, rather than delineating the unique effects of different types of justice on organizational outcomes, as is common in justice research (see e.g., Bies, 2005), Fairness Heuristic Theory posits that, from the psychological perspective of employees, different types of justice experiences are cognitively integrated to form an overall global judgment of organizational fairness, which then influences employees' workplace-relevant attitudes and behaviors (also see Ambrose & Schminke, 2009). Fairness Heuristic Theory labels this global judgment a *fairness heuristic.* Second, in contrast to the assumption in many justice analyses that people are constantly vigilant to fairness information, Fairness Heuristic Theory posits that people's attention to fairness is, in reality, episodic. Specifically, the theory advances the idea that employees use initial cues about the fairness of their workplace to form a judgment about whether their organization is fair. Once constructed, this fairness judgment acts as cognitive heuristic—a relatively change-resistant lens through which subsequent organizational experiences are interpreted.

Why Do People Use Fairness Heuristics?

Fairness Heuristic Theory takes the view that people think about fairness in terms of their relationships with other people. The theory draws on the group-value model of justice and the relational model of authority (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992) in its view of how and why people care about fairness. The relational or group-based nature of fairness has been demonstrated empirically in numerous studies. Fair treatment has been shown to have a greater impact on overall fairness perceptions when people are dealing with members of their in-group compare to when they are dealing with members of an out-group (Huo et al. 1996). For example, the fairness of in-group authorities has been shown to matter more to people than the fairness of out-group authorities (Platow et al. 2012; Smith, Tyler, Huo, Ortiz, & Lind, 1998). These studies and others all demonstrate that fairness is closely connected to judgments about one's relationship to the organizational authorities, teams, and groups at whose hands fair or unfair treatment is received (also see Tyler and Lind, 1992).

Consistent with this research, Fairness Heuristic Theory argues that people seek to form judgments about the fairness of their environment early on because fairness is a readily constructed indicator that suggests they are safe from exclusion and exploitation by others in their group. That is, attending to fairness information helps people resolve what Lind (1994) terms the "fundamental social dilemma," a dilemma posed by the tension between the potential advantages and disadvantages associated with engaging as a group member. Although group membership may come with psychological and material benefits, including an increased sense of structure and identity and the possibility of partaking in group rewards that are greater than would be had as an individual, it also comes with the risk of potential losses in terms of individual rewards, identity, personal freedom, and control over one's future. The fairness heuristic, then, acts as a "pivotal cognition" in resolving this dilemma, allowing people to assess whether they are safe or unsafe as they move from a self-interested orientation to an orientation that favors the interests of their group or organization.

Building on the idea that fairness is relational in nature, original formulation of Fairness Heuristic Theory conceptualized fairness acts as a proxy for interpersonal trust (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos, Wilke, & Lind, 1998). In support of this notion, Van den Bos and colleagues (1998) have shown that, in a laboratory experiment, people who lack information about whether they can trust an authority figure rely more on procedural fairness information when assessing their outcomes and satisfaction with their experience. Similarly, in a field survey, Jones & Martens (2009) found that employees use fairness information as a heuristic to infer trust when the trustworthiness of organizational authority is uncertain.

What Are the Consequences of Fairness Heuristic Processes?

A major feature of Fairness Heuristic Theory is its proposition that the cognitive construction of fairness judgments is episodic in nature. That is, the theory conceives of the fairness judgment process as fundamentally changing over time. People in a new situation (e.g., those who are just joining a team, those who suddenly find themselves with a new boss, or even students who find themselves in an unfamiliar psychology experimental procedure) will be motivated to find any available fairness-relevant information in the environment in order to develop a fairness judgment that can guide their behavior. Once they have generated a fairness judgment, however, people will then begin

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to assimilate later experiences to this initial fairness judgment. A key idea here is that, in order for one's fairness judgment to be useful as a decision heuristic, helping a person answer the question of whether to engage and cooperate with his or her team or organization, the judgment has to be generated quickly and it needs to be reasonably stable (and, therefore, not open to radical revision at each small variation in treatment, process, or outcome). This set of propositions leads to some novel predictions about how time and context affect the fairness judgment process.

PRIMACY EFFECT

Fairness Heuristic Theory predicts a primacy effect in the fairness judgment process, whereby early fairness information receives greater weight than does later fairness information. Stated slightly differently, the same fair or unfair action (or outcome) will have greater impact if it is encountered early on in a new context than if it is encountered later on.

Lind, Kray, and Thompson (2001) empirically demonstrate just such a primacy effect. In a simulated work context, they found that early experiences of a fair or unfair procedure (in this experiment, being given or denied voice) had a greater impact on people's ultimate fairness judgments than did later experiences of the same procedures. Specifically, people who were treated fairly versus unfairly by a new supervisor on the first round of a three-round work assignment showed greater differences in ratings of their supervisor's fairness than did people who received the same fair or unfair treatment on the third round of the assignment. Consistent with what one would expect from the group-value and relational-authority foundations of Fairness Heuristic Theory, this effect was found to be stronger for people who identified more strongly with their work group.

More recent work has applied Fairness Heuristic Theory's primacy effect hypothesis to study individuals' dispositional characteristics and their judgments about future events. People's chronic propensity to trust others has been shown to act as a preexisting fairness heuristic through which their workplace experiences are interpreted (Bianchi & Brockner, 2012; Colquitt, Scott, Judge, & Shaw, 2006). In addition, existing global fairness judgments can influence the extent to which people anticipate being treated fairly by a future organizational policy that has not yet been implemented (Rodell & Colquitt, 2009). In this research, these anticipatory justice judgments also predict the fairness workers report experiencing in relation to the policy three months after it was enacted.

SUBSTITUTABILITY EFFECT

A phenomenon closely related to the primacy effect involves the substitutability of different kinds of justice information in informing overall fairness judgments. That is, the global judgment used as a fairness heuristic can be derived from distributive, procedural, or interactional justice information and, according to the theory, subsequent fairness experiences and information are assimilated to this early global judgment. Van den Bos, Vermunt, & Wilke (1997) used this aspect of Fairness Heuristic Theory, the notion of primacy effects, and the idea that fairness heuristics are resistant to change, to predict that early fairness information of one type would affect the interpretation of later fairness information of a different type. Thus, early fair or unfair outcomes should affect the evaluation of subsequent procedures or later interpersonal treatment. The basic idea here is that a person encountering multiple "waves" of fairness information will rely on his or her existing generalized fairness judgment from the first wave of experiences rather than a full evaluation of the fairness of later waves of information.

The substitutability of fairness information is particularly important when people find themselves in situations in which information is missing or ambiguous. In these contexts, people are especially likely to use aspects of the situation about which they *do* have fairness information to guide their interpretation of the fairness of aspects of the situation for which they lack information or when available information is difficult to interpret (cf. Van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997; Van den Bos, Wilke, & Lind, 1998). Consistent with this, empirical evidence demonstrates that when the fairness of one's outcome is difficult to decipher (as is the case when one does not know the outcome of others relative to one's own outcome), procedural fairness has a greater impact on overall fairness judgments (Van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997). Similarly, when information about the fairness of a process or procedure is ambiguous, as in the case of procedures that implicitly (rather than explicitly) deny people the opportunity to voice their opinions, people are more likely to rely on outcome information when assessing the fairness of the process (Van den Bos, 1999).

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Interestingly, the primacy and substitutability effects predicted by Fairness Heuristic Theory and found in the studies described earlier provide a novel explanation for the especially strong influence of procedural justice on overall fairness perceptions and related attitudes. Based on the finding that procedural fairness has a stronger impact on overall fairness judgments and satisfaction than outcome fairness, a substantial body of scholarship put forth the view that procedural justice may matter more to people than distributive justice (e.g., Alexander & Ruderman, 1987; Tyler & Caine, 1981; see generally Lind & Tyler, 1988). However, Fairness Heuristic Theory points to the possibility that procedures might influence global fairness perceptions more than outcomes do, not necessarily because processes are more important to people than outcomes, but because process information tends to come *before* outcome information (primacy effect), and later outcome information might be assimilated to the general fairness judgment already formed on the basis of the early process information (substitutability effect).

When Are Fairness Heuristics More or Less Likely to Be Re-evaluated?

According to Fairness Heuristic Theory, preexisting fairness heuristics normally color expectations about the fairness of one's organization and thus determine how subsequent events are interpreted. However, the theory also predicts that "phase shifting events" can trigger a re-evaluation of a given fairness heuristic. Such events generally constitute a violation of expectations. They may include extreme norm transgressions, such as in the case of violation of moral mandates (Skitka, 2002), extremely negative treatment, or evidence that the relationship between the individual and organization is changing. For instance, Jones and Skarlicki (2005) demonstrate that workers who are given initial social cues indicating that an authority was fair but then received unfair treatment by that authority (thus violating their expectations) react more negatively to this treatment than workers who had no previous information about the reputation of the authority (also see Folger, Rosenfield, Grove, & Corkran, 1979). Furthermore, Lind and his colleagues (Lind, Greenberg, Scott, & Welchans, 2000) present evidence that workers who had recently been fired or laid off were very sensitive to how fairly they were treated by their organization, specifically at their time of termination (a time when the relationship between the organization and the individual is obviously changing), and perceptions of how fair their termination was significantly predicted workers' intentions to file wrongful termination claims.

Fairness Heuristic Theory suggests that reevaluation of fairness heuristics will occur during shifts in organizational structure or fundamental changes in organizational relationships, such as during mergers and acquisitions. When we consider the Uncertainty Management Model later in this chapter, we will see that feelings of personal uncertainty and insecurity may act as the mechanism by which many of these situations trigger reevaluation of the general fairness assessment underlying the fairness heuristic.

Conversely, drawing on what is known about general heuristic processing, we can also speculate about contexts in which fairness heuristics are less likely to be re-evaluated. The original statements of Fairness Heuristic Theory (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos et al. 2001) did not include consideration of many of these factors, but theoretical advances in social cognition allow us to make some predictions based on what we now know about cognitive processes. Specifically, people who lack cognitive resources have been shown to rely more on heuristic processing of other types. In the domain of social judgments, for instance, people who are cognitively busy or depleted (for example, when they are distracted by other tasks or tired) are more likely to use heuristic shortcuts when making judgments about other people (e.g., Gilbert & Hixon, 1991; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988; Bodenhausen, 1990). Van den Bos, Peters, Bobocel, and Ybema (2006) also demonstrate that being cognitively busy may make people less likely to react negatively to inequity. Specifically, in their studies, they present evidence that although people are generally less satisfied when given better outcomes than others' compared to when they are given outcomes that are equitable, this difference in satisfaction goes away when people's available cognitive resources are strongly limited. The authors suggest that, under cognitive load, people are less likely to correct for their initial preferences to incorporate fairness concerns.

We would expect, then, to use the terminology of Fairness Heuristic Theory, that when people are operating under high cognitive load, or when they are cognitively "stretched thin," or depleted by either their workload or the nature of their job, they will be less likely to transition from the heuristic-based use phase back into the more detail-oriented judgment phase in terms of how they assess the fairness

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of their environment. In this circumstance, it is possible, as Lind (2001) notes, that unfair experiences may be stored in memory and not evaluated until the cognitive load is reduced. At that time, insecurity, uncertainty, or sudden recognition of a large discrepancy between a previous fairness judgment and one's current experience might trigger a rapid transition into the judgment phase, with attendant re-evaluation of both overall fairness and willingness to cooperate and identify with the team or organization.

Practical Implications

There are a number of interesting implications of Fairness Heuristic Theory, as well as the research it has stimulated on primacy and substitutability effects. First, the theory predicts that organizational leaders would do well to focus on impressing those they lead with fairness-relevant behaviors early in their tenure in leadership positions. At least one empirical study has provided support for this prediction: Janson, Levy, Sitkin, and Lind (2008) found evidence of a fairness heuristic in leadership evaluations. In their study, which used data from a leadership survey conducted in several different countries and in a variety of different industries, positive early fairness judgments seemed to overwhelm later information about other positive or negative leadership behaviors. Fairness Heuristic Theory also suggests that special attention should be devoted to fairness at times when situational changes in the organization might prompt people to move from the "use phase" of fairness judgments into a new judgment phase. Mergers and acquisitions, or changes aimed at restructuring units, tasks, or reporting relationships are all the sort of phase-shifting events that seem likely to push people back into devoting cognitive resources to assessing (or re-assessing) the fairness judgments that underlie the fairness heuristic.

Note that there might be times when an organization may benefit from shifting its employees away from the use phase and into the judgment phase. If previous unfair treatment (real or perceived) had generated the perception of an unfair leader or organization, it might be advisable to "induce" feelings of a change in situation so that a new, more positive, heuristic can be generated. Sometimes, we suspect, organizations make a show of restructuring because those in charge intuit that this might allow for a "fresh start" with new fairness judgments based on new (and better) treatment experiences. Of course, if such a deliberate induction of a new judgment phase for fairness beliefs is not followed by experiences that are, in fact, perceived to be fair, then this exercise is likely to be unsuccessful.

That said, the line of reasoning just described does point out that changes intended to induce new fairness perceptions need to be both obvious and proximal to the people whose fairness judgments need to be changed. It seems unlikely that shuffling C-suite personnel would stimulate rank-and-file employees to shift into judgment phase processing of fairness information, but a change of membership in the employee's immediate team might well have that effect.

On the other hand, Fairness Heuristic Theory also suggests that there are times when organizational leaders can rely on the cooperation generated by employees' positive fairness heuristics without being concerned deeply with how their every action is judged with respect to fairness. When team members are deeply in the use phase posited by the theory, for example, they might be relatively insensitive to unfair treatment; this is similar to the experimental participants who first received and then were denied voice in the Lind et al. (2001) primacy study. It would never be wise to push this "buffer" against later unfair treatment too far, of course, even if the theory is correct and minor injustices are disregarded in the use phase, there is always the danger that memories of these injustices will be processed the next time events push the person in question into a new judgment phase.

Furthermore, Fairness Heuristic Theory's contention that global fairness judgments matter most in determining people's attitudes and behaviors related to cooperation and group identification has important workplace implications. Although specific types of fairness (distributive, procedural) may indeed show stronger or weaker relationships on some specific organizational attitudes or behaviors, Fairness Heuristic Theory notes that it is the rapidly formed global fairness judgment that will have the strongest impact on those attitudes and behavior that are specifically related to one's tendency to engage with and contribute to their group. Ambrose and Schminke (2009) provide striking evidence for this pattern of effects. Their data imply that a top priority for managers should be fairness in any form; Fairness Heuristic Theory suggests that this is true especially early in employees' organizational relationships.

In general, the practical implications of Fairness Heuristic Theory point to the wisdom of being attentive to events that might prompt

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organizational members to shift into the judgment phase of processing information about fairness. When members are likely to be in this phase, organizational leaders would be well-advised to quickly make fairness-relevant information and experiences salient. The substitutability effect tells us that it does not really matter much what sort of fairness information is put forward, only that this information be presented early on and be unambiguous. The implication of the Lind et al. (2001), Van den Bos, Vermunt, & Wilke (1997), and Van den Bos et al. (1998) studies is that the judgment phase is quite limited in duration. Thus, if positive fairness judgments are quickly engendered, they will facilitate cooperation and generally positive team-orientated behavior. Once the use phase is in full force, organizational leaders might then focus their efforts on avoiding any substantial injustice, since such experiences may push employees into a new judgment phase. Instead, at this point, leaders should focusing on making good use of the cooperation and engagement prompted by employees' positive fairness heuristic to secure good results for all.

Uncertainty Management Model

Extending many of the propositions put forth by Fairness Heuristic Theory, the Uncertainty Management Model (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos, 2001a; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) mainly focuses on further exploring *when* and *why* fairness matters to people. The Uncertainty Management Model also provides new insight into the process by which fairness judgments are formed. One of the model's principal contributions to the organizational justice literature is its conceptualization of the link between fairness concerns and uncertainty management; it argues that fairness beliefs serve a specific psychological function: they help people manage feelings of uncertainty. Consequently, the model predicts that people are more likely to attend to fairness during times of high uncertainty, that psychological uncertainty plays a crucial role in the construction of fairness beliefs, and that positive fairness beliefs help people deal with uncertainty.

Psychological Uncertainty

The Uncertainty Management Model begins the notion that personal uncertainty is a ubiquitous facet of modern life, both inside and outside of organizations.[1] From fluctuations in the economy to the increasingly diverse ways in which organizations and the labor force are structured, today's workers must deal with high levels of unpredictability. An abundance of social psychological research shows that people are generally averse to feelings of uncertainty and are motivated to reduce subjective feelings that the world is an uncertain place (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hogg, 2007; McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001). People may cope with uncertainty by seeking out information (Ashford & Cummings, 1985) or as Hogg and colleagues argue, they may look to the structure that groups and organizations afford (Hogg 2000; Hogg & Mullin, 1999). Yet, although uncertainty is common, the Uncertainty Management Model emphasizes that it is also variable. Levels of uncertainty fluctuate in organizational life and these fluctuations, the theory suggests, are central to understanding the relationship between uncertainty and fairness concerns.

Uncertainty and Fairness Concerns

Building on Fairness Heuristic Theory's proposition regarding the role played by fairness beliefs in solving the fundamental social dilemma, the Uncertainty Management Model argues that people are motivated to seek information related to fairness in order to reduce feelings of uncertainty elicited by the situations they find themselves in. As noted earlier in our discussion of Fairness Heuristic Theory, the belief that one will be treated fairly by others is a way to cope with the many sources of uncertainty that come with entering into a new relationship with an organization. But the Uncertainty Management Model recognizes that uncertainty can come from a variety of sources or events. When a person is in a state of personal uncertainty or insecurity, the model suggests, he or she will seek to gather new information and revisit the fairness judgment process, in order to assess whether he or she can expect fair treatment in the future. In the terms used in Fairness Heuristic Theory, feelings of personal uncertainty or insecurity push people out of the use phase of fairness judgments and into the judgment phase wherein new beliefs are constructed. Hence, in times of high personal uncertainty, the impact of fairness should be particularly pronounced. Thus, uncertainty is seen as a moderating variable in the impact of fairness-relevant experiences. When uncertainty is high, people are more sensitive to fairness; when it is low, they are less sensitive.

Some of the empirical evidence reviewed earlier in support of Fairness Heuristic Theory

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also provides support for predictions about informational uncertainty in the Uncertainty Management Model. For instance, Van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt, & Wilke's (1997) finding that procedural fairness matters more when others' outcomes are unknown provides evidence for the idea that uncertainty about how one is being treated in relation to others may prompt an increased vigilance toward fairness concerns. Similarly, Lind et al. (2000)'s demonstration that the impact of fairness is greater during employee terminations than during their work tenure suggests that fairness may increase in subjective importance during times of informational uncertainty.

Furthermore, research on individual differences in how people deal with, or attend to, uncertainty is consistent with the main proposition put forth by the model. For instance, Colquitt and his colleagues (2006) provide evidence that chronic differences in risk aversion moderate justice effects in the way that the Uncertainty Management Model would predict. That is, people who were highly risk averse, or chronically sensitive to uncertain situations and outcomes, are found to react more strongly to unfairness than people low on risk aversion. This moderating effect of risk aversion on justice concerns is found to impact employees' tendency to engage in counterproductive workplace behaviors as well as their task performance. Similarly, Thau, Aquino, and Wittek (2007) show that individual differences in self-uncertainty (or the degree to which people tend to feel insecure about themselves in relation to others) moderate the interactive effect of situational uncertainty and fairness experiences on workplace behavior. Specifically, this research found that the relationship between unfairness and employee antisocial behavior was stronger for employees high in chronic self-uncertainty.

Recent research conducted both in the field and in the laboratory provides further support for the main hypothesis put forward by the Uncertainty Management Model—that feelings of uncertainty moderate the psychological impact of experiences of fairness and unfairness. In a field sample of subordinates working in different industries, the relationship between unfairness (operationalized as abusive supervision in this study) and employee deviance was stronger when situational uncertainty was high rather than low (in this study, lack of authoritarian management style was used as an indicator of uncertainty; Thau, Bennett, Mitchell, & Marrs, 2009). In another field study, uncertainty (operationalized in this case as lack of work-time control and negative changes at work) moderated the effect of fairness on employee absenteeism (Elovainio et al. 2005). Furthermore, in a survey of technology firm teams, Li, Bingham, and Umphress (2007) found that the positive relationship between perceived procedural fairness and collaborative problem-solving was moderated by environmental uncertainty. Specifically, for team members who perceived a high level of uncertainty, procedural fairness was positively related to collaborative problem-solving, but no relationship existed between these variables when uncertainty was perceived to be low.

There is a great deal of evidence for the basic assertion of the Uncertainty Management Model that the salience of uncertainty enhances the impact of fairness information. In a series of experimental studies, Van den Bos (2001a) found that people who were asked to write about a time when they had experienced uncertainty reacted more strongly to a subsequent unfair procedure than people who were not made to think about experiences of uncertainty. Similarly, people who were asked to think about an uncertain aspect of their life (their own mortality) reacted more strongly to receiving an unfair outcome when compared to people who were not asked to contemplate their own death (Van den Bos, 2001b). In addition, Van den Bos and Miedema (2000) showed that people who thought about their own mortality showed enhanced positive reactions to fair processes compared to people who had not thought of their mortality, suggesting that uncertainty may enhance the extremity of fairness judgments in both positive and negative directions. Van den Bos, Poortvliet, Maas, Miedema, and Ham (2005) demonstrated that mortality salience prompts greater personal uncertainty and that this uncertainty is the source of the fairness effects observed in these studies.

In addition, people appear to use fairness judgments to guide behavior in uncertain situations, as the Uncertainty Management Model predicts. For instance, a field study investigating people's attitudes toward environmental issues found that community members who felt a high level of informational uncertainty regarding an environmental policy relied more on perceived procedural fairness of the initiative when determining their level of support for it (See, 2009).

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Fairness Concerns and the Human Alarm System

Empirical work relating justice concerns to the human alarm system (see Van den Bos et al. 2008; Van den Bos & Lind, 2009) demonstrates how general feelings of uncertainty can affect fairness judgments. That is, the way that personal uncertainty affects fairness judgments is through the activation of a very fundamental set of processes that humans use to respond to potential threats. Thus, Van den Bos and colleagues (2008) demonstrated that cultural symbols that cue feelings of alarm and uncertainty can produce increased vigilance toward fairness information. Specifically, they show that people presented with alarm-signaling stimuli such as flashing lights and exclamation points showed more extreme reactions to fair and unfair processes and outcomes. This research suggests that uncertainty does not need to be produced by, or even to be especially relevant to, a particular context, in order to significantly affect how people attend to fairness in that context. In addition, this work points to a very fundamental, perhaps even physiological, basis for the relationship between uncertainty management and fairness concerns. Indeed, in Van den Bos et al.'s (2008) article, the authors note that there is some research using fMRI imaging that suggests a connection between the presentation of cultural symbols of alarm and the activation of brain areas known to be involved in moral judgments.

The importance of the human alarm system research and the conceptual analyses linking it to the Uncertainty Management Model lies in the demonstration of how basic and how fundamental to human psychology this pattern of fairness responses might be. When events that provoke alarm and uncertainty occur, the response of greater sensitivity to fairness—or in Fairness Heuristic Theory terms, the shift to judgment phase processing—might well be more or less automatic. And as we will point out in the next section, there are some important implications of this for organizations.

Practical Implications

Following the basic premise put forth by the Uncertainty Management Model, organizational leaders should focus most on fairness in situations in which their employees are likely to experience feelings of uncertainty, as these situations are likely to increase the psychological impact of fair and unfair experiences. For example, performance evaluations and promotions are contexts that may provoke an unusually high level of employee uncertainty. Devoting more time and resources to voice in these contexts would, according to the model, yield optimal results.

Furthermore, a strong practical implication of research on the human alarm system is that general personal uncertainty, or uncertainty produced by factors outside the workplace, can affect vigilance toward fairness at work. In many of the studies on uncertainty management and fairness, the stimuli that provoked greater uncertainty and then greater attention to fairness information had little or nothing to do with the situation within which fairness sensitivity was examined. This is evident in the studies just reviewed, which used cultural symbols such as exclamation points or flashing lights to prompt uncertainty. In addition, in most empirical work that tests the Uncertainty Management Model, feelings of uncertainty are experimentally induced using an episodic recall task that is completely unrelated to the contexts or scenarios later used in these studies to assess fairness sensitivity (e.g., Van den Bos 2001a, 2001b). The participants in these experiments responded with greater fairness sensitivity when they had merely been asked to recall what it felt like to be uncertain in an ostensibly unconnected prior study.

The Uncertainty Management Model's propositions related to when fairness matters most also have interesting practical implications for the workplace (also see Lind & Van den Bos, 2002). We mentioned earlier that Fairness Heuristic Theory suggests that, during times of leadership change or organizational transformation, people are likely to be pushed into the judgment phase and thus it may be more important to be fair during such times. The Uncertainty Management Model adds an additional set of times and situations in which it is most advisable to be fair. Specifically, when an employee's personal life is in flux, encountering fair processes, procedures, and outcomes at work is likely to have greater psychological impact than in other circumstances. Thus, when designing workplace benefits, rules and procedures for serious illness or for maternity/paternity leave, it would be wise to minimize unnecessary bureaucracy and instead focus on communicating compassion and respect for claimants.

If one accepts the notion that being attentive to fairness is not without cost—for example, an organization must invest time and effort in order to provide voice or give explanations to employees—then

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the earlier discussion suggests *when* a manager is likely to derive the most substantive benefits from devoting resources to being fair. Allocating resources to fairness when an employee's life, job, or personality does not suggest any personal uncertainty may yield less robust results (see for example, Desai, Sondak, & Diekmann, 2011). A savvy manager would be well-advised, then, to stay attuned to signs of uncertainty in his or her reports in order to determine when to devote the most time and effort to fairness.

That said, a completely instrumental view of when it "pays" to be fair is unlikely to be successful for several reasons. First, it is difficult to read with precision when people are uncertain and when they are not, and a mistake in making that judgment could lead a manager to neglect fairness when it is quite important. Second, it is worth noting that, even in experiments showing an uncertainty-moderated effect of fairness treatment, the effect of fairness was not always zero in the uncertainty-absent conditions. That is, even without inducing feelings of uncertainty, fair treatment or lack thereof still generally mattered to people. Finally, there is always the danger that unfair treatment, especially if repeated, will itself produce feelings of uncertainty, instigating a psychological need for fair treatment. It is better on all counts, we believe, to always maintain a reasonable level of fairness but to focus special efforts on being fair in those situations and for those people that most need it.

In general, the Uncertainty Management Model, viewed in the context of the larger organizational justice literature on the many positive effects of fair treatment, suggests that any material costs associated with being fair would be well recompensed by the beneficial outcomes produced by the positive feelings that fairness induces in the organization's employees. However, this effect should be magnified when employees are dealing with feelings of uncertainty produced by their work life or personal life.

Fairness Heuristics, Uncertainty Management, and System Justification Theory

Recently, some scholars (Van den Bos, 2009a; Tost & Lind, 2010; Lind, 2011) have started working toward bringing the predictions suggested by Uncertainty Management Model and Fairness Heuristic Theory together with those put forth by System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), a seemingly contrasting account of what drives people's concern with fairness and how justice judgments are constructed. Drawing on the ideas they discuss, and on some recent empirical work, we aim, in this next section, to further the discussion of how fairness heuristic and uncertainty management theories might be reconciled with system justification perspectives; in doing so, we highlight some potential directions for future research.

System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) argues that people possess a motivated tendency to perceive the systems they function within to be just and legitimate. That is, individuals *want* to believe that their institutional and organizational systems operate in a fair and reasonable manner. Instances of unfairness, then, tend to be psychologically threatening because they run counter to this belief. In order to manage the psychological threat or anxiety caused by encountering unfairness and maintain a positive view of their system, people oftentimes are motivated to justify or defend injustices that they encounter in their environment (cf. Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Kay & Zanna, 2009). Hence, while Fairness Heuristic Theory and the Uncertainty Management Model focus on explaining when and why people have negative reactions to instances of unfairness, System Justification Theory seeks to explain why people sometimes may not perceive instances of unfairness in such a negative light.

To reconcile these two perspectives, Tost and Lind (2010) argue that system justification processes may predominate in what Fairness Heuristic Theory calls the "use" phase of justice judgments. They propose two distinct psychological modes of justice evaluation—a system justification mode (predominating in the use phase) and a system critique mode (predominating during the judgment and re-evaluation phase). Furthermore, they make predictions regarding specific kinds of phase-shifting events that facilitate a move out of the system justification mode into the system critique mode (for more detail on their theoretical model, see Tost & Lind, 2010; Lind, 2011).

We build on Tost & Lind's (2010) model to suggest factors that might inhibit, rather than facilitate, people's transition out of the use phase of the fairness heuristic. That is, drawing on recent research emerging from System Justification Theory, we outline several factors that may increase people's tendency to interpret new experiences of unfairness through the lens of their positive global beliefs about the fairness of their system, rather

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than re-evaluating this global belief. In doing so, we emphasize the role that psychological rationalization processes may play in prolonging the use phase of the fairness heuristic.

A central proposition put forth by System Justification Theory is that people have a tendency to rationalize away or downplay instances of unfairness and injustice, especially under conditions in which their system justification motive is heightened. In other words, people often engage in cognitive restructuring of reality in order to maintain their belief that their system is just and fair. Thus, as long as people are able to psychologically rationalize and justify instances of unfairness in their system and instead make them seem reasonable and deserved, they will likely remain in the use phase of the fairness heuristic. However, when people encounter injustice that is so extreme or unexpected that they are unable to rationalize it (i.e., a phase shifting event), the system-justification mode of justice judgments may be replaced with the system critique mode.

In addition to the absence of phase-shifting events, recent empirical work suggests specific organizational contexts in which system-justifying processes are likely to persist over system-critique processes. People have been shown to be more likely to justify their systems when these systems face external threats (Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005), when people feel especially dependent on their systems (Kay et al. 2009), when their systems seem inescapable (Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010) or are perceived as stable and unchanging (Laurin, Gaucher & Kay, 2013) and when people's sense of personal control is low (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008). Under these conditions, the psychological threat posed by acknowledging system unfairness is purported to be especially high, and thus people are increasingly motivated to engage in rationalization of unfairness that they encounter (cf. Kay & Friesen, 2011). Next, we provide two illustrative examples of the effects of two contextual factors that enhance people's tendency to rationalize away instances of unfairness: system dependence and system inescapability.

In one experimental study looking at the effect of system dependence on people's motivation to perceive their system as fair, participants were either led to believe that they were quite dependent on their university for influencing their life outcomes (high university dependence condition) or they were made to believe instead that the government influenced their life outcomes (low university dependence condition; Kay et al., 2009). Participants were then asked to rate the fairness of their university's funding policies. Results indicated that when people were made to feel dependent on their university, they rated the university's funding policies to be significantly fairer than when they were made to feel dependent on the alternative system (the government). The same effect was found for people who were asked to rate the fairness of their government's funding policy—people's who were made to feel dependent on their government rated its funding policy as significantly fairer than people who were, instead, made to feel dependent on their university. These findings suggest a motivated tendency to perceive one's elements of one's system as fair when one feels dependent on that particular system.

In another experiment, participants were made to believe that their socio-political system (the nation of Canada) was either easy or difficult to leave (Laurin et al. 2010). Participants were then asked to rate the extent to which gender inequality in Canada was caused by systemic unfairness or by biological differences between men and women. Results revealed that, compared to participants who were made to think that emigrating out of Canada was easy (low inescapability condition), participants who were made to think that emigrating out of Canada was difficult (high inescapability condition) increasingly attributed gender inequality in Canada to biological differences between men and women instead of systemic unfairness. These findings demonstrate that perceptions of system inescapability may enhance people's motivation to defend their system and avoid seeing it as unjust. This study also provides an example of the kind of specific rationalizations people may use to order to maintain their belief in system fairness when faced with evidence to the contrary.

In addition to research suggesting some specific conditions or contexts in which the system justification mode is likely to be enhanced and predominate, other empirical work emerging from System Justification Theory directly investigates one potential moderator of people's tendency to rationalize unfairness rather than react negatively to it. Laurin, Kay, and Fitzsimons (2012) experimentally demonstrate that when an unfavorable policy is framed as absolute or unchangeable, people tend to downplay or rationalize away that policy's negative qualities, consistent with a system justification perspective. However, when the same policy is construed as changeable, people react against it,

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a finding that is consistent with the Uncertainty Management Model's prediction that, in situations with low certainty, people are increasingly likely to react negatively to instances of unfairness. For instance, in one experiment, Laurin and colleagues (2012) presented three groups of participants with information about a new policy that restricted their ability to use their cell phones while driving. They then varied, between groups, how changeable the policy was. When this policy was framed as changeable, participants indicated that they were more bothered by the policy than did participants who were given no information about how changeable the policy was. However, when the policy was framed as absolute (nonchangeable), participants indicated that they were *less* bothered by the policy than participants given no changeability information, suggesting a rationalization effect. Although this study does not specifically focus on attention to fairness information per se, it highlights another moderator (i.e., changeability) of people's tendency to engage in the psychological processes suggested by Fairness Heuristic or Uncertainty Management theory versus those suggested by System Justification Theory. When a particular policy change is certain (i.e., absolute), people tend to rationalize away its negative qualities; however, when there is uncertainty regarding whether a policy change will endure, people react against it. Future research could directly explore the application of these findings to people's vigilance to fairness.

Thus, as these examples suggest, people may be more likely to rationalize away instances of unfairness and remain in the use phase of the fairness heuristic when they find themselves in organizations that they feel dependent on or are unable to escape. In addition, the implementation of unfair organizational policies that are perceived as unchangeable may be more likely to induce people's rationalization processes rather than encourage them to re-assess their fairness heuristic. Though not covered in depth in this section, there is also strong evidence to suggest that system threat, system stability, and low personal control are three other factors that enhance people's system justification motive and thus may prolong the use phase of the fairness heuristic (cf. Kay & Friesen, 2011; Laurin et al., 2013).

Conversely, when people find themselves in work contexts that induce feeling of personal uncertainty or when they encounter unfair experiences that they are unable to rationalize away, they may be more likely to switch to the judgment phase suggested by Fairness Heuristic Theory. What is clearly needed in the future is research that addresses more directly the phenomenon of phase-shifting in justice judgment processes (which, to date, is supported empirically mainly by the Jones & Martens, 2009, research and by inference from the primacy and substitutability studies). We need to look especially at how factors like changeability, uncertainty, and strength of identification play against each other to affect system justification versus system critique reactions.

Conclusion

According to Fairness Heuristic Theory, the Uncertainty Management Model, *and* System Justification Theory, sometimes people at work think about fairness differently than they do at other times. The theories and research that we have reviewed in this chapter point to a number of situations that are likely to provoke special reactions to justice and justice-related information. The task remains to us researchers and theorists to resolve the details of when and which episodic reactions prevail, but we have certainly begun to explore when, how, and why justice will matter more or less in organizational contexts.

Note

1. The Uncertainty Management Model addresses both "information uncertainty" and "personal uncertainty." We will be focusing more on the latter, but we will note some aspects of the former when we discuss how the "substitutability" effects that support Fairness Heuristic Theory predictions are ways of dealing with informational uncertainty.

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