Felt justice. Correlations between university students and university personnel

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Abstract. Organizational justice is large and widely research topic in organizational sciences. Humans typically have a need to be heard and recognized. This need is often felt as a need of fair treatment of people, especially in relationships between leaders and followers. Former research has shown a correlation of felt justice between students and staff. This means that in the situations where school staff members feel fairness and justice from their leadership, students also feel same from the staff. Typically, people feel to be treated well, just when they believe that their leaders or teachers hear their views and opinions. This research was done by utilizing two different questionnaire tools, one for staff and one for students. Data was gathered in 2019 and 2020 in annual organizational surveys. The overall research question is: Is there a correlation between felt justice of staff and students´ satisfaction? This article shows the correlations and discusses the results of these correlations. Future research aspects and practical recommendations will also be issued in the paper.

Keywords: leadership · organizational behavior · management · justice · fairness

1 Literature

The beginning of equality theories could be said to be in Stouffer´s theory of relative deprivation in 1949. It´s basic, groundbreaking, idea was that person´s satisfaction towards e.g. salary is not related to it´s absolute amount rather than where person compares it (Stouffer 1949). This theory was later further developed by Homans (1958), who presented that peoples´ interaction can be seen as social exchange which are carving the rules for people and community. Homans was also one of the first researchers who introduced the idea that people are sensitive for imbalance in normative exchange i.e. people feel it unfair when they feel that they receive less than they give or they expect to deserve (ibid). These theories were further developed by Peter Blau who first introduced the concepts of justice and fairness to work organizations and to experienced exchange ratios between the workers and the leader (Blau 1964). In addition he divided these exchange ratios to economic and social ones (Ibid), from which especially the latter ones are further scrutinized by modern theories for fairness and justice.

Adams developed this thinking further when introducing his equity-theory. In that model he derived everything to two main matters, exchange ratio and it´s balance. He also considered the consequences of imbalance in these ratios. Like Homans, Adams, saw that people compare their situation to others in similar situation or to their own

former situation. Simplified, Adams saw that the motivating force is always person´s pursue to achieve balance in all domains in life (Adams 1965). Thibaut and Walker (1975) presented the concept of voice-effect to organizational justice. It means that it is crucial for felt justice that people are heard when information is gathered for decisions (Thibaut & Walker 1975).

These early theories have introduced the principle division to *distributive justice* and *procedural justice* to organizational psychology. The former is peoples' experienced feelings on how just they consider gained rewards such as salary, feedback, benefits etc. The latter is how they experience the just of rules and procedures according to which these rewards are given and decided. Later Bies and Moag (1986) added the third category, the concept of relational justice or *interactional justice*. It considers how the people are treated during decision-making processes. These three categories have become the basic pillars of the concept of organizational justice.

Experienced fairness at workplace is simultaneously an important and a difficult concept. The importance of fairness and justice has been presented in numerous studies, which have shown how it effects heavily on the overall atmosphere and results of the organization, as well as on the health, commitment and the job satisfaction of the workers themselves (Al-Zu'bi, 2010; Ambrose, et al., 2007; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Fassina, et al., 2008; Hausknecht, et al., 2004; Li & Cropanzano, 2009a).

At the same time, the number of individual variables within the three categories that can be considered forming the experience of fairness is great and difficult even to define, as many potential concepts and models are still under scientific discussion. It is possible to study fairness as a scientific object from several points of view, for example managerial, juridical, behavioral, social or emotional, which means that any attempt to paint a comprehensive picture ends eventually into a multidisciplinary quagmire of definitions. For a thorough view on the current discussion and evolving paradigms around this subject, the reader can have a look at, for example, Cohen (2015), (Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2015) or Greenberg (2011).

While all the components of the experience of fairness are hard to define, there is evidence that the experienced fairness within an organization can be influenced through leadership practices. For example, Zoran and Ana (2012) have presented the differences created by active and passive leadership styles on the experienced fairness. "Active leadership styles are positively linked and have both, direct and indirect effects on organizational commitment. That means that one mechanism by which leaders may be able to build commitment among their subordinates is also through fair treatment, which leads to higher levels of their job satisfaction" (Zoran & Ana, 2012, p. 520). Similarly Walumbwa, et al. (2004) have shown that transformational leadership style is positively correlated with employee's job satisfaction and organizational commitment. In the similar vein, Colquitt, et al. (2002), Li, et al. (2007), Rupp, et al. (2007) and Whitman, et al. (2012) have presented results that fairness in leadership produces a working environment that is more favorable for positive results than an environment with lower level of leadership justice.

While a majority of the research focuses on individual experience, fairness is also important on organizational level. Li and Cropanzano (2009b) have shown that the experience of fairness works also at unit level and it has effects on important organizational variables, like unit performance, workers' mental health, and their behavior as organizational citizens. Organizational fairness can thus be seen as an important piece

of organization's cultural structure (Taatila, 2004), giving or denying it competitive edge. These findings open up the possibility to compare the experienced fairness between individual organizational units and see if there is a correlation between them and the results the unit has produced.

In an educational organization, several desired goals are related to the academic performance and advancement of the students. This has quickly become important in the continuously more competitive world of higher education, where the metrics related to graduate production have become ever more important either in student acquisition – related comparison tools (U-Multirank, 2021) or in securing public funding, as in the case in Finland (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021).

There is a large body of literature, which argues that the overall social climate of a school is associated with the pupils' academic performance and wellbeing (Anderson, 1982; Han, 2009; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Karvonen, et al., 2005; Maddox & Prinz, 2003). For example, Elovainio, et al. (2011) have shown that there is a statistically significant association in Finland between the primary school (1st to 9th grade) staffs' perception of fairness at the workplace and the pupils' reports on their interest towards studying. However, a majority of research regarding the effects of the experienced fairness of the staff in educational organizations is aimed at primary schools. Thus it can be asked if and how does fairness the university staff experiences effect on the students and their overall satisfaction and academic performance. Deepening our understanding on this topic would give the university leadership more tools to enhance the desired results of their institution.

The theoretical discussion was derived to a hypotheses (H1) and a research question (RQ1):

(H1): There is a correlation between personnel´s felt justice and students´ satisfaction.

(RQ1): If the correlation exists, how can it be interpreted and what conclusions can be made?

2 Research

2.1 Initial sample

This research will be based on material gathered from Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS) in the years 2019 and 2020. It is conducted by utilizing two different questionnaire tools called Eezy Spirit (for staff) and Student Barometer.

Eezy Spirit is a questionnaire, which has been developed to study employee experience and it is widely used in Finland in different industries. It was chosen to be the one for studying the staff experience since it has questions about felt justice and personnel´s feelings towards management and organization.

Student barometer is a questionnaire for higher education students within TUAS. Its' objectives are to provide data and information for researchers, research institutes education developers and decision makers in the institute. Student barometer handles a variety of different matters from student life by asking students´ opinions from quality of studies to their civil life activities and their expectations of the future.

The Eezy Spirit questionnaire was sent to whole personnel of TUAS. The number of respondents varied from 602 in 2019 (88% response rate) to 633 in 2020 (91%). Respondents answered to propositions in Likert scale 1-4 (1 = totally disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = somewhat agree and 4 = totally agree) and "I don´t know". The "I don't know" answers were excluded from this research. Number of propositions varied slightly between the years from 63 to 65.

As the research question is to scrutinize the felt justice of the personnel, four different propositions from Eezy Spirit –questionnaire were selected as the basis of analysis:

P1) Organization treats staff fairly and evenhandedly
P2) Organization rewards staff in just ways
P3) My superior treats staff evenhandedly
P4) Organization executes principles of equality well.

The respondents were grouped by the competence areas, which are the basic units for personnel and degree programs and therefore also for the students. As the comparison was done per competence area, only the responses of those units have been included in the comparison, i.e. the administrative units of TUAS have been neglected from the research. These samples are shown in table XX.

The student barometer data consists of 2905 individual students as respondents in year 2020 and 1989 in year 2019. They answered at most to 201 different questions and propositions. As the questionnaire was dynamic and depended partly on the previous answers, not all the questions and propositions were targeted to all of the students.

Students´ satisfaction was studied by selecting two propositions for analyses. These propositions were:

SP1) Evaluate how satisfied you are to study in TUAS
SP2) How probably you would recommend TUAS for your friend?

Former proposition was to answered with scale 1-5, where 1 was very unsatisfied, 2 was unsatisfied, 3 was neutral, 4 was satisfied and 5 was very satisfied as the latter one was answered to scale 0-10 where 0 was the worst and 10 was the best number.

Also the students' responses were grouped by their degree programs to the competence areas, which makes it possible to compare the felt justice of the staff members to that of the students per each competence area. Division of respondents is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Competence area and the number of respondents in both years

Competence area	Number of staff respondents 2019	Number of staff respondents 2020	Number of student respondents 2019	Number of student respondents 2020
Paramedicine, public health nursing and midwifery	15	18	111	157
Performing arts	18	19	98	89
Information and communications technology	41	55	369	396
Chemical industry	37	43	213	205
Rehabilitation, oral health and diagnostic services.	31	27	261	378
Fine arts	14	13	23	50

Logistics, services and industrial management	28	25	142	300
Media arts	12	14	107	122
Construction industry	28	27	55	238
Nursing	33	32	183	245
Social work and early childhood care	20	22	150	208
Technology industry	32	38	68	194
Entrepreneurship and sales	34	47	209	323
Total	375	413	1989	2905

2.2   Analysis

Samples were taken from the data mass and were composed to a statistical model with excel spreadsheet. Staff members as well as students were grouped under schools and arithmetic averages and standard deviations were calculated to each proposition. Averages of answers are shown in table 2. In the table 2 colums P1-P4 are the averages of the staff's answers´ and columns SP1 and SP2 are the averages of the students´ answers.

Table 2. Averages of answers

School	P1 2019	P1 2020	P2 2019	P2 2020	P3 2019	P3 2020	P4 2019	P4 2020	SP1 2019	SP1 2020	SP2 2019	SP2 2020
Paramedicine, public health nursing and midwifery	2,143	2,059	1,929	2,438	3,467	3,667	2,333	2,625	3,367	3,586	6,697	7,255
Performing arts	2,778	2,941	2,375	2,923	3,438	3,222	3,214	3,063	3,806	3,652	7,439	7,101
Information and communications technology	2,711	2,792	2,400	2,396	3,514	3,423	3,083	3,094	3,717	3,640	7,353	7,163
Chemical industry	2,108	2,282	2,088	2,200	2,917	2,868	2,406	2,576	3,692	3,603	7,236	7,235
Rehabilitation, oral health and diagnostic services.	2,000	2,040	1,789	2,263	3,654	3,167	2,208	2,500	3,414	3,570	6,854	7,160
Fine arts	3,000	3,083	2,909	3,200	3,692	3,692	3,400	3,250	3,609	3,700	7,348	7,440
Logistics, services and industrial management	2,560	2,375	2,095	2,150	3,577	3,538	3,100	3,100	3,693	3,661	7,450	7,323
Media arts	2,250	2,692	1,889	2,182	3,583	3,857	3,000	3,154	3,415	3,689	6,840	7,377
Construction industry	2,375	2,520	2,333	2,227	3,435	3,333	2,909	3,000	3,750	3,697	7,712	7,896
Nursing	1,909	1,844	1,862	1,769	2,667	2,656	2,125	2,310	3,464	3,488	7,084	6,934
Social work and early childhood care	2,000	2,000	1,938	1,722	3,471	3,364	2,176	2,474	3,235	3,184	6,450	6,223
Technology industry	2,300	2,457	2,000	2,063	3,423	3,061	2,630	2,743	3,507	3,723	6,687	7,410
Entrepreneurship and sales	2,724	2,763	2,192	2,294	3,194	3,444	2,844	3,053	3,436	3,557	6,916	7,354
Total Average	2,414	2,493	2,197	2,299	3,380	3,321	2,736	2,851	3,544	3,586	7,068	7,210

After calculating the arithmetic averages further analysis was done with SPSS statistical analysis program. In SPSS proposition´s correlations were analyzed by single tailed Pearson correlation. The results of this analysis are shown in table 3.

Table 3. Pearson correlation, 1-tailed. The statistically significant correlations between the responses of the students and the staff are **bolded**.

	SP1 2019	SP1 2020	SP2 2019	SP2 2020
SP1 2019	1			
SP1 2020	,638**	1		
SP2 2019	,919**	,557*	1	
SP2 2020	,533*	,889**	,572*	1
P1 2019	**,566***	**,499***	**,537***	0,393
P1 2020	**,548***	**,582***	**,479***	0,459
P2 2019	**,591***	0,391	**,621***	0,353
P2 2020	**,486***	**,540***	0,451	0,398
P3 2019	0,001	0,240	-0,010	0,165
P3 2020	-0,127	0,204	-0,042	0,218
P4 2019	**,643****	**,639****	**,626***	**,511***
P4 2020	**,515***	**,614***	**,522***	**,545***

*p<.05, **p<.01,

3 Results

As seen from the table 3 there are several significant correlations to be found. Firstly, the questions about the students' satisfactions correlated significantly to each others in the years and between the years. Thus we can conclude that they give a fairly reliable understanding about the felt justice of the students of a particular competence area.

Looking at the correlations between the responses of the students and the staff, it can be seen that P4 ("Organization executes principles of equality well"), correlates significantly with all propositions of the students. In addition, proposition P1 ("Organization treats staff fairly and evenhandedly") correlates significantly to both students' propositions in the year 2019 and the correlation between SP2 ("Evaluate how satisfied you are to study in TUAS") and the P1 is also significant in 2019 but not in 2020. Further, P2 ("Organization rewards staff in just ways") has statistically significant with two of the four students' samples.

Looking at the questions P1 to P4, it can be seen that P1 and P4 are very closely related to each other. Both ask about the overall impression the respondent has about the organization's activities (execute principles of equality well vs. treat staff fairly and evenhandedly). It is probably a fair estimation that the respondent's own treatment effects on her view on the wider picture, but there may also be other aspects to consider, like the discussions with the colleagues and the overall atmosphere at the work place. Thus it can be expected that their correlational results present the similar level of confidence when compared to the responses of the students. This can be seen from the table 3, even in the case of correlation with SP2 from 2020, as the levels of significance with P1 are close to statistical significance and the levels of significance with P4 are only significant at p < .05 –level.

Question P2 discusses also about the respondent's views on the organization, but it is more concrete than P1 and P4, and thus some respondents may have found it differing from the other two. This would explain why the correlations to the responses of the students are less significant and more varied.

The clear difference to the pattern can be found from P3 ("My superior treats staff evenhandedly"), which does not correlate in any year to any students' propositions. It

is also very different to P1, P2 and P4, as it is clearly a personal question aimed at an individual superior. As that superior is daily responsible for the practices related to the satisfaction of the students and the staff, it could have been expected that here the relationship would have been even stronger than in the responses describing the overall situation within the organization. However, the analysis did not reveal this pattern, which opens up interesting points for discussion.

Overall, it seems that this small sample indicates H1 might be correct and that there indeed is a correlation between the felt justice between the students and the staff members. Thus it is possible to advance to consider answers to RQ1 in the following chapter.

However, one should note that the samples for this study were quite small and they represented only the results of one individual higher education institution. In order to get a more comprehensive picture of the situation, a wider study should be considered. It would be beneficial, if there would be more culturally varied sample as well as longer time-series, in order to analyze if also some causalities could be found.

4   Conclusions and discussion

It indeed seems that there is a strong indication that there is a connection between university staff's felt justice and student satisfaction, similarly as presented earlier in primary education (Elovainio, et al., 2011). The result is not surprising *per se* as similar ones have been found out also in other contexts (Colquitt, et al., 2002, Li, et al., 2007, Rupp, et al., 2007, Whitman, et al., 2012). A higher education institute is an organization, and as the tasks within it are highly demanding intellectual endeavors, it would be more surprising to find strong contrary evidence.

The interesting difference rises when comparing the results related to P3 to those of P1 and P4. As written above, it would have been expected that the question that has the strongest link to the individual competence area in question, would have produced the strongest correlation. However, this was not the case, which opens up some paths to speculation.

One possible reason is that the staff is more satisfied with the immediate superior than with the wider organization and the more distant leadership. The staff members see the daily situation in which the immediate superior is and thus could relate better with her than with the more distant and bureaucratical top-level leadership. Thus the staff members would indicate their negative responses more freely in questions discussing the overall practices of the organization than when discussing about a specific person.

Another possible reason is that the shared organizational practices have in this case a stronger effect on the overall experience of fairness than the daily leadership of the immediate superior. If the organization has a very strong structural guidance, an individual superior can not make major changes within the given framework. In that type of situation the results related to the superior would be more indicative about her personal relationship with her staff and thus most likely inconclusive regarding the students satisfaction, as the results here present.

These two potential answers deserve more thorough analyses in the future. It is somewhat outside the scope of this study, but it would be interesting to know, whether the finding is based on a bias that favors the immediate superior or on such a strong

organizational structure that the immediate superior cannot smoothen it if required, or to some totally different explanation. However, for this study it can be stated that there is a difference, but that it does not hinder with the big picture of correlation between the university staff's felt justice and student satisfaction.

Regarding RQ1, the research suggest that there is a significant correlation between that of the students and the staff with whom they interact. However, the small sample leaves many questions to be answered. Are the results cultural, organizational or domain specific, i.e. can similar results be found in other organizations, culture or academic domains? Can we find some causalities, i.e. if the staff will feel the situation more just, will the students become more satisfied or *vice versa*? What are the mechanism by which the leadership can affect the experience of justness within a university and what are the effects of those actions? These and numerous other questions should be further researched in order to get more solid understanding of the topic.

Despite the current lack of hard evidence this is a topic that should be studied further. The higher education has been growing rapidly all over the world, and even small differences to the student and graduate satisfaction could have major effects on the future development on global scale. If, for example, it would be possible to smoothen the current pointed discussions about the experienced fairness between different generations, it could have a positive impact on the societal development. Producing alumni who feel that they have been treated unfairly and who see the current system as the reason for unjustness, has often been shown leading to civil unrest. Being able to create a system that feels just to all of its participants would probably be a major breakthrough.

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