



REVIEW ARTICLE / İnceleme Makalesi

<https://doi.org/10.37093/ijsi.1626425>

Malleability of Perceived Leader Justice: A Theoretical Model on the Role of Situational Affect and Leader Gender

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Abstract

Organizational scholars have often overlooked changes in employees' perceptions of fairness regarding outcomes, procedures, and interactions at work. However, growing empirical evidence suggests significant temporal variability in justice perceptions. Despite the importance of this evidence, the mechanisms underlying changes in perceptions of leader fairness remain poorly understood. Scholars have called for theoretical models that explore the conditions under which fairness perceptions occur within individuals. This article aims to bridge the affective and justice literatures by proposing a model for understanding changes in fairness perceptions over time. It aims to contribute to the justice literature by clarifying how employees might adjust their perceptions of leader fairness through their situational affect. Additionally, it underscores the importance of leader gender in predicting change in employees' perceived injustice of their leaders.

Keywords: Organizational Justice, Contextual Affect, Leader Gender.

Cite this article: Dural, U. (2025). Malleability of perceived leader justice: A theoretical model on the role of situational affect and leader gender. *International Journal of Social Inquiry*, 18(2), 427-437. <https://doi.org/10.37093/ijsi.1626425>

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Article Information

Received 24 January 2025 Revision 10 June 2025; Accepted 17 June 2025; Available online 31 August 2025

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Algılanan Lider Adaletinin Değişebilirliği: Durumsal Duygulanımın ve Lider Cinsiyetinin Rolü Üzerine Kuramsal Model

Öz

Örgütsel araştırmacılar, çalışanların iş yerinde sonuçlar, prosedürler ve etkileşimlere ilişkin adalet algılarındaki değişimleri sıklıkla göz ardı etmişlerdir. Ancak, artan görgül kanıtlar, adalet algılarında önemli ölçüde zamansal değişkenlik olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu kanıtların önemine rağmen, yöneticilere ilişkin adalet algılarındaki değişimlerin altında yatan mekanizmalar yeterince anlaşılmamıştır. Araştırmacılar, bireyler arasında adalet algılarındaki değişimlerin hangi koşullar altında gerçekleştiğini keşfedecek teorik modeller geliştirilmesi çağrısında bulunmuşlardır. Bu makale, zaman içinde adalet algılarındaki değişimlerin anlaşılmasına yönelik bir model önererek duygu ve adalet literatürleri arasındaki bağlantıyı kurmayı amaçlamaktadır. Makale, çalışanların durumluk duygularıyla yöneticilere ilişkin adalet algılarını nasıl değiştirebileceklerini açıklığa kavuşturarak adalet literatürüne katkı sağlamayı hedeflemektedir. Ayrıca, çalışanların liderlerine ilişkin adaletsizlik algılarındaki değişimin öngörülmesinde liderin cinsiyetinin önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Örgütsel Adalet, Bağlamsal Duygu, Lider Cinsiyeti.

JEL Kodları:

1. Introduction

How does perceived leader justice evolve over time? Organizational scholars have often overlooked changes in employees' perceptions of fairness regarding outcomes, procedures, and interactions at work (Colquitt, 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2001; Holtz & Harold, 2009). This oversight stems, in part, from the assumption embedded in most organizational justice theories that fairness perceptions are stable. However, growing empirical evidence suggests significant temporal variability in justice perceptions (e.g., Holtz & Harold, 2009; Guo, 2012; Jones & Martens, 2009; Jones & Skarlicki, 2012; Konradt et al., 2020; Matta et al., 2017; Rubenstein et al., 2019a, 2019b; Silva & Caetano, 2014; Soenen et al., 2017; Tremblay et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2022).

Understanding the malleability of fairness perceptions is critical because such changes significantly impact various employee outcomes. For instance, increasing fairness perceptions predict positive outcomes, such as enhanced work engagement (Xu et al., 2022), helping behavior (Rubenstein et al., 2019a), and extra-role behaviors (Tremblay et al., 2017). Conversely, declining fairness perceptions are associated with negative outcomes, including withdrawal behaviors (Xu et al., 2022), voluntary turnover (Rubenstein et al., 2019b), and adverse health effects like depressive symptoms and sleep problems (Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2020).

Despite its importance, the mechanisms underlying changes in justice perceptions—particularly perceptions of leader fairness—remain poorly understood. Scholars have called for theoretical models that explore the conditions under which variations in fairness perceptions occur within individuals (Hillebrandt & Barclay, 2013; Xu et al., 2022). This article responds to this call by proposing a model that examines how contextual factors influence employees' appraisals of work events, and shape their perceptions of leader justice.

The justice literature already provides models linking work events to fairness perceptions (Colquitt et al., 2023). Employees evaluate their leader's fairness from the selection process,

through performance evaluations, pay systems, and daily interactions. These event-based evaluations predict employees' attitudes, behaviors, and well-being (Colquitt et al., 2023). Building on the framework of Jones and Skarlicki (2012), this article explores how situational affect and leader gender influence employees' judgments about justice-related events, resulting in changes in perceived leader fairness over time.

The paper aims to make two main contributions. First, it offers propositions about how situational affect shapes appraisals of justice-related events involving leaders. As Cropanzano et al. (2011, p. 228) observed, "We intuitively recognize the emotional nature of fairness. It is time for scholars to do the same." Barsky and Kaplan's (2007) meta-analysis highlighted the role of affect as an antecedent of justice perceptions. However, research remains limited on how employees' situational affective states influence fairness appraisals and judgments over time (Barsky et al., 2011; Forgas & George, 2001). Since the 1990s, justice scholars have emphasized the role of emotions in fairness perceptions (Scher & Heise, 1993). However, much of this work has focused on emotions as reactions to unfair events, neglecting the role of pre-existing affective states in shaping fairness judgments. Second, it highlights the influence of leader gender on the malleability of fairness perceptions. Growing evidence suggests that gender biases may affect evaluations of female leaders. However, this area requires further investigation.

The article begins by reviewing existing theoretical models and empirical evidence on the dynamics of leader fairness perceptions. It narrows its focus to situational affect and leader gender as key factors influencing the malleability of fairness perceptions, presenting a theoretical model and related propositions.

2. Malleability of Fairness Perceptions Through Justice-Related Work Events

In their daily work lives, employees encounter various justice-related events—discrete incidents with clear start and end points during which they evaluate the fairness of outcomes and procedures (Schollon et al., 2003). Exposure to these events can either reinforce employees' existing fairness beliefs, leading to stability over time, or prompt revisions of these beliefs (Jones & Skarlicki, 2012).

Prevailing fairness perceptions often remain stable in the absence of significant organizational or environmental change (e.g., Soenen et al., 2017). This stability partly arises from employees' reliance on mental shortcuts or heuristics to evaluate justice-related events. According to Fairness Heuristics Theory (Colquitt et al., 2001; Lind, 2001; Van den Bos et al., 2001), employees who perceive their leader as unfair may disregard or undervalue signals of fairness, reinforcing their belief in the leader's unfairness. Even when encountering fairness-related events, they may fail to attribute justice to their leader, sustaining their negative perception over time unless a substantial change occurs in the workplace. Moreover, employees may struggle to process all relevant information about fairness in procedures and outcomes, further perpetuating existing heuristics (Qin et al., 2015).

Referent Cognitions Theory and its updated version, Fairness Theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2001), propose that employees observing an unfair event engage in sense-making rather than relying solely on heuristics. This involves comparing current procedures with hypothetical alternatives and considering organizational norms and responsibilities. Employees evaluate the severity of the event, the presence of rule or norm violations, and the leader's accountability for unfair outcomes. While these theories explain minor revisions in fairness perceptions, they do not fully explain how and why employees undergo significant changes in their overall fairness judgments.

Dynamic approaches to organizational justice (Jones & Skarlicki, 2012) explore mechanisms of within-person variation in justice perceptions over time by integrating insights from these theories. These approaches assume that employees continuously evaluate their fairness perceptions based on direct experiences of procedural fairness or unfairness. When actions align with stated promises or organizational visions, employees are more likely to sustain their fairness perceptions. Conversely, discrepancies between expectations and a leader's behavior motivate employees to revise their fairness attributions. The dynamic model identifies key characteristics of justice-related events that influence changes in fairness perceptions: unexpectedness (e.g., "Did I expect this decision from my leader?"), unfavorability (e.g., "How unfavorable is this event to me?"), and the salience of its positive or negative aspects (e.g., "What are the degrees of positivity and negativity in this event?"). This paper extends the model to explore perceptions of leader fairness.

Jones and Skarlicki (2012) argued that when justice-related events align with employees' existing expectations, fairness heuristics remain intact, as predicted by Fairness Heuristics Theory (Lind, 2001). For example, when employees perceive their leader to be fair and the leader's actions align with this belief, they are likely to automatically attribute fairness to the leader, even without evaluating whether the procedures meet ethical standards. However, when events contradict these expectations, employees engage in sense-making processes, as proposed by Referent Cognitions Theory and Fairness Theory (Cropanzano et al., 2001; Holtz & Harold, 2009; Jones & Martens, 2009; Jones & Skarlicki, 2012; Weick, 2001). If employees who generally perceive their leader as fair encounter significant inconsistencies—for example, in performance evaluations—they are more likely to question the leader's fairness by comparing past behavior or alternative actions taken by other leaders in the organization.

In addition to the unexpectedness of justice-related events, employees may rely on cognitive frames or sense-making processes to evaluate a leader's fairness based on the unfavorability of the event (Jones & Skarlicki, 2012). Employees are more inclined to attribute unfairness when outcomes are unfavorable to them. Empirical evidence indicates that individuals are less likely to perceive decisions as unfair when outcomes are favorable, but unfavorable outcomes increase perceptions of procedural unfairness (Brockner & Weisenfeld, 2005). People often evaluate unfavorable outcomes as unexpected due to optimistic biases (Sharot & Garrett, 2016), which increases their salience and prompts fairness reappraisals.

Dynamic models suggest that an accumulation of justice-related events with highly salient, unexpected, and unfavorable outcomes can disrupt employees' fairness attributions (Jones & Skarlicki, 2012). Building on this, the present study proposes that long-term observation of

justice-related events with unexpected, unfavorable, and salient characteristics related to a leader increases the likelihood that employees will revise their perceptions of the leader's fairness.

Proposition 1: *The higher the frequency of unexpected and unfavorable justice-related events involving a leader, coupled with salient characteristics, the more likely employees are to attribute unfairness to their leader over time.*

3.The Role of Situational Affect in Changing Perceptions on Leader's Fairness

This article further argues that employees' situational affect can influence their appraisal of justice-related events, potentially leading to changes in their perceptions of leader fairness. Previous research has shown that experimentally manipulated affective states can guide individuals in evaluating the fairness of outcomes (e.g., Hill et al., 2021) especially when they lack information about how their counterparts are being treated or when the fairness of organizational actors is unclear (e.g., van den Bos, 2007).

Two primary mechanisms are involved in event appraisal: one is the valence of the affective state (positive versus negative), and the other is attentional biases related to affective states. The valence of affect may signal to employees their safety or lack thereof in a justice-related event. Positive affect may reduce employees' tendency to view work events as unfair, meaning that their justice perceptions are likely to remain stable over time. Conversely, negative affect may increase this tendency, resulting in a decline in perceived leader fairness over time. This argument draws on information processing approaches in the social cognition literature. Emotional appraisal and "feeling-as-information" approaches suggest that individuals often rely on their emotional experiences to make judgments in uncertain or ambiguous situations (Schwarz & Clore, 2003), as is common in justice-related events at work. Accordingly, affective states may inform employees about the safety of their environment and influence their motivation or goal orientation toward the relevant characteristics of these events (Barsky et al., 2011). Negative affect generally signals unsafe or problematic conditions by increasing vigilance toward the social environment, such as the perceived degree of rule or norm violations in a justice-related encounter with a leader. Research has shown that employees with higher negative affect are more likely to perceive unfairness at work (Barsky & Kaplan, 2007).

Thus, employees' affective states may color their appraisal of events where they observe fairness or unfairness directed at themselves (Hill et al., 2021; Scher & Heise, 1993). Changes in affective states can serve as a situational catalyst for altering the frames through which employees judge their leader's fairness on a daily basis. Experimental studies have shown that affective experiences before a justice-related event shape how individuals perceive and assess the event, thereby influencing their overall fairness judgment process (van den Bos, 2007; Guo, 2012). Similarly, state affect can shape future expectations, which, in turn, affect fairness perceptions. Hill and colleagues (2021) proposed that employees' affective states can

trigger either positive expectations about future outcomes (optimism) or negative expectations (pessimism). These expectations can “color” perceptions of fairness-related actions. Their experience sampling study and three experimental studies revealed that positive affect induced an optimistic state, which predicted adherence to justice norms and rules. In contrast, negative affect elicited a pessimistic state, which predicted breaches of justice norms and rules.

Beyond influencing event appraisal, employees' affective states may narrow or broaden their attention, vigilance, and information processing during justice-related events. Information processing theories suggest that positive affect leads to more automatic, intuitive information processing, relying on heuristics when judging the fairness of leaders (Maas & van den Vos, 2009). In contrast, negative affect usually induces broader information processing, reducing reliance on intuition and encouraging deliberative thinking and rational analysis in fairness judgments.

Therefore, this article proposes that negative situational affect may increase employees' vigilance and reliance on sense-making processes during judgments of unfair events, while positive contextual affect may lead employees to rely more on fairness heuristics when evaluating the fairness of events. Jones and Skarlicki (2012) similarly suggested that the “cumulative effects of inconsistent information” (p. 12) regarding the fairness of organizational entities, after sense-making processes following assessments of procedural unfairness, can lead employees to change their perceptions of fairness over time. In contrast, the cumulative effect of frequent reliance on fairness heuristics is less likely to induce changes in fairness perceptions. Sense-making is argued to occur when events are unexpected, salient, or intense for the employee, particularly when fairness heuristics about leaders are not well-established (i.e., when there is uncertainty in fairness perceptions of leaders; Jones & Martens, 2009; Jones & Skarlicki, 2012). This paper extends this argument by suggesting that negative situational affect may increase the likelihood of changing perceptions of leader fairness through heightened perceived unexpectedness, unfavorability, and intensity of unfair events, while positive situational affect may not alter prevailing fairness perceptions.

Building on these arguments, this article proposes that positive situational affect, which is more closely associated with perceptions of safety in the environment (Schwarz & Clore, 2003), may reduce the likelihood of evaluating events as unfavorable, incongruent with expectations, or intense. Positive affect can lead employees to focus more on aspects of events that adhere to rules and norms, such as the leader's compliance with justice standards (Barsky et al., 2011). In contrast, negative contextual affect, which may be linked to the attribution of problems in the environment, could increase the likelihood of evaluating events as incongruent with expectations, unfavorable, and more intense. Negative affect would signal potential problems in the environment, motivating employees to expect justice breaches, leading to greater perceptions of unfairness over time.

Based on these arguments and empirical findings, this article proposes the following hypotheses:

Proposition 2: *Positive state affect decreases the perceived unexpectedness, unfavorability, and salience of unfair events, thereby reducing within-person variation in perceptions of leader fairness over time.*

Proposition 3: *Negative state affect increases the perceived unexpectedness, unfavorability, and salience of unfair events, thereby increasing within-person variation in perceptions of leader fairness over time.*

4. Role of Leader Gender in Changing Perceptions of Leader Fairness

Leader gender can significantly influence the way employees' perceptions of leader fairness evolve. Women in leadership roles often face heightened scrutiny due to societal stereotypes, which can affect their perceived fairness. Women in leadership positions generally receive lower performance evaluations compared to their male counterparts, with this disparity being more pronounced in male-dominated environments (Stamarski & Hing, 2015). This bias can lead to perceptions of unfairness, as female leaders may be judged more harshly, regardless of their actual performance.

Such biased evaluation of women leaders' unfairness stems partially from discrepancies between gender role expectations and leadership roles. According to role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), leadership roles often conflict with stereotypical female gender roles in most work contexts, resulting in biases toward female leaders. Leadership roles tend to favor masculine or agentic qualities, such as assertiveness, dominance, and competitiveness (Lord et al., 2020). Hence, women leaders need to exhibit such masculine or agentic behaviors to be labelled as leaders. However, when women leaders exhibit agentic or masculine traits, they violate prescriptive gender norms, resulting in negative attitudes toward them (Rudman et al., 2012). This backlash effect creates a double-bind for women in management positions: while traditional roles of women involve communal or feminine traits, such as being kind, soft spoken, these behaviors are often insufficient for employees to recognize them as leaders.

As a result of this, female leaders may be disliked or disfavored, contributing to biased evaluations of their fairness. Therefore, this study posits that the gender of a leader may moderate the relationship between the characteristics of justice-related events and the change in fairness perceptions. Employees working under female leaders may be more likely to attribute fair outcomes or procedures to external factors unrelated to the women leaders themselves, which could result in less variation in their perceptions of fairness over time.

Proposition 4: *Working with female leaders decreases the within-person variation in perceptions of leader fairness over time.*

5. Discussion and Future Directions

This article aims to extend the leader justice literature by offering a theoretical model that explains how perceptions of leader fairness change over time. It contributes to the literature

by emphasizing the roles of contextual affect and leader gender in shaping the development and change of fairness perceptions. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of contextual factors—such as the characteristics of justice-related events—which have not been extensively studied within dynamic frameworks of organizational justice.

The propositions presented here can be tested through a longitudinal field study, providing valuable insights into both the dynamics of leader justice and individuals' more natural reactions to justice breaches. The Experience Sampling Method (ESM), also known as Ecological Momentary Assessment, is a valid tool for assessing dynamic changes in justice perceptions and measuring within-person variation in affect over time (Fisher & To, 2012; Rupp & Paddock, 2010). The ESM is particularly useful for capturing daily affective experiences, as it has been shown to correlate strongly with other affective measures, such as physiological indicators, self-reported affect scales, and behavioral measures (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987). By allowing researchers to examine events and psychological experiences in real-time within the natural work environment, ESM provides a robust method for collecting data over time while participants continue functioning within their usual settings (Scollon et al., 2003). It is increasingly used in the management literature to study person-situation interactions (Fisher & To, 2012) and can assess both within-person and between-person variability in justice perceptions.

Organizational tenure may moderate the influence of situational affect on changes in leader fairness perceptions. Employees with longer tenure may have already established a sense of leader fairness, leading to more stable cognitive frameworks or fairness heuristics regarding their leader. Research suggests that the frequency of changes in perceived fairness tends to decrease with work experience and organizational tenure (Ambrose & Cropanzano, 2003). Therefore, future research should account for variation in informational ambiguity—specifically, initial perceptions of organizational fairness. Sampling participants who are newcomers to an organization could help control for this factor, as they are less likely to have well-established knowledge of their leader and are more likely to rely on their affective experiences to interpret justice-related events. Newcomers, being less certain about fairness in general, would likely place greater emphasis on their state affect when evaluating fairness.

Despite these contributions, the proposed model has limitations. First, it assumes that changes in fairness judgments are primarily driven by emotions, which color employees' evaluations of justice-related events. This approach overlooks the role of motivated cognition or perception. Motivated cognition suggests that employees are not passive in altering their perceptions; instead, they are active agents whose judgments are influenced by their goals and motivations (Barclay et al., 2017; Bashshur et al., 2023). Employees may selectively attend to justice-related cues that align with their goals, potentially overriding the influence of situational affect on their fairness judgments. Future models could integrate the interactive effects of motivated cognition and affective experiences in predicting changes in fairness perceptions.

Rupp and Paddock (2010) proposed that, while justice perceptions evolve through daily encounters with justice-related events, over time these individual-level encounters contribute to collective justice perceptions within teams or workgroups and shape the overall justice

climate within organizations. This collective perception, in turn, affects individual employees' justice perceptions. Building on this idea, future research could explore how justice climate influences perceptions of leader fairness and employees' state affect. For instance, in organizations with a high justice climate, there may be less within-group variability in fairness perceptions, and employees may experience more positive affect (e.g., from observing positive remarks about a leader's adherence to justice norms).

One limitation of longitudinal models, particularly in ESM-based data analysis, is the potential for spurious relationships between time-varying variables. For instance, variables may show strong correlations at certain time points but be influenced by unaccounted-for time-stable or time-varying factors (similar to omitted variable bias in correlational designs) (Bael & Weiss, 2003). Future research should consider potential cycles in state affect and justice perceptions by using techniques such as pre-whitening (incorporating residuals from regressions into the model). Additionally, researchers should control for dispositional affectivity, which may influence variability in both state affect and fairness perceptions.

Another potential limitation is the reactivity of subjects to repeated affective measurements over time (Bael & Weiss, 2003). Repeated assessments of affect could lead employees to become more aware of or sensitive to certain affective experiences, affecting the validity of the study. While face-to-face meetings and discussions with participants can help mitigate this issue, it remains a potential threat to the internal validity of future studies.

In conclusion, this paper bridges the affective and justice literatures by proposing a model for understanding changes in fairness perceptions over time. It contributes to the justice literature by clarifying when employees adjust their perceptions of leader fairness. Additionally, it underscores the importance of leader gender in predicting employees' cognitive and affective responses to injustice perceptions in organizations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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FUNDING

No financial support was received from any person or institution for the study.

ETHICS

The author declares that this article complies with ethical standards and rules.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Uzay Dural  General contribution rate: 100%.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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