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How do judgments of justice form during periods of change: a sensemaking model

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Abstract

In a world where organizational change is part of the everyday life of the organization, research has shown that issues of organizational justice have a great impact on organizational outcomes (e.g. Colquitt et al., 2001) and concern all members of the organization. The uncertainty and ambiguity that characterize situations of change in organizations make questions of organizational justice a particularly touchy subject matter. Members of the organization want to understand and make sense of organizational change. How individuals form their judgment of justice when confronted with an organizational change? Which process of sensemaking does it involve? We propose here to examine the process through which members of the organization during organizational change form their judgment of justice considering that this process is akin to a process of sensemaking. (Weick, 1995).

Our contribution is twofold: first we summarize the contributions of theories and research on justice and emphasize that they do not account for the social processes through which justice judgments are formed in organizations. Building on the works of sensemaking in organisations (Weick, 1995; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; 2005), we propose an exploratory model of formation of justice judgments that emphasizes three fundamental aspects of the life of organizations undergoing change: uncertainty, ambiguity and the role of social interactions.

Introduction

Justice is a central part organizational life (Greenberg, 1990a) that has an impact on organizational outcomes (Colquitt *et al.*, 2001). Cropanzano *et al.* (2007) see it as a "glue" that allows people to work efficiently together, and injustice as the "corrosive solvent" that is destructive to the community. Justice issues tend to arise in a particularly acute manner during periods of change that are dominated by uncertainty (Lind and Van den Bos, 2002): people want to understand and make sense of what is happening.

The goal of our research is to understand how members of an organization form their judgments of justice while taking into consideration that this process is akin to a process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). How do individuals form their judgment of justice when confronted with an organizational change? Which process of sensemaking does it involve ?

Our contribution is twofold. First, we consider previous literature on organizational justice and explore the different dimensions of justice, its impact on the behavior of the actors and the way a judgment of global justice is formed. This section highlights the fundamental role of context in which judgments of justice are formed as well as the complexity of the process. The limits of this work, in particular the fact that they do not take much into account the social dimensions of the process of the formation of judgments of justice, are subsequently highlighted. Accordingly, we propose in the second part to see the formation of judgments of justice as a process of sensemaking and present an exploratory model of understanding the process of the formation of judgments of organizational justice during change process.

1. Organizational justice during organizational change.

1. 1. Dimensionalized conceptions of organizational justice.

Research on justice begin with where individuals begin asking about what they receive relative to their contributions in social institutions. Individuals form judgments about the rightness or wrongness of these distributions, the methods through which these distributions were made, and, more generally, management methods. These evaluations have an influence on their behavior (Cropanzano and Ambrose, 2001).

Distributive, procedural and relational or interactional justice

In any situation in which profits are distributed or exchanged, the question of justice appears. Research on organizational justice began with the importation in the field of organizational behavior of notions of social and interpersonal justice (Greenberg, 1990a). As soon as the 1960s, studies have shown the impact of feelings of justice and injustice on important attitudes and behaviors at work (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997 *in* Nadisic, 2008). Organizational justice leads to three contributions: economic benefits, respect for moral values and good interpersonal relationships (Cropanzano and Rupp, 2002), which also constitute the three ways of organizational justice (Cropanzano et al., 2001a): distributive justice, procedural justice and interactional or relational justice.

Distributive justice is achieved when individuals feel that their contributions are justly rewarded and that the results are fairly distributed (Cohen, 1987). According to Ambrose and Arnaud (2008), distributive justice refers to the perceived fairness of outcomes (Adams, 1963; Homans, 1961). The equity theory of Adams (1963, 1965, *in* Colquitt et al., 2008) by adopting Homans' concept of profit and investment (1961, *in* Colquitt et al., 2008) in the context of social exchange asserts equity as a standard of allocation and the basis for distributive justice. Individuals compare the rapport between their contributions and their results with that of an individual referent, or one obtained during a reference period. The distribution will be fair if proportionality is respected. Therefore, feelings of justice rely on comparisons operating through **reference points** (Stuffer et al., 1949 *in* Colquitt et al., 2008). Subsequently, other allocation standards have been defined, such as contribution, equality, need, and the combination of these three standards (Deutsch, 1985 *in* Ambrose and Arnaud, 2008; Leventhal, 1980), or multiple standards of allocations (Mendel, 1989; Elliott and Meeker, 1986, *in* Colquitt et al., 2008). These studies thus move the focus from the reactions of receptors of rewards or resources, to the behaviors of distributors of rewards or resources (Leventhal et al., 1976, *in* Colquitt et al., 2008).

The second dimension of organizational justice is **procedural justice**, which focuses on the decisions and procedures through which the distribution of outcomes operates. It owes its definition to Blau (1964, *in* Colquitt et al., 2008), who then refers to the acceptable codes of behavior in social exchanges. The expectations described by Blau (1964, *in* Colquitt et al., 2008) in his theory of exchanges take into account the wider social norms of fair behavior. In

exchange relationships, a second exchange, the exchange of trust, comes to superimpose upon the economic exchange.

In a similar perspective, Leventhal (1980) criticizes the theory of equity by stressing that it neglects the procedures through which the distribution occurs. He already stated (1976a, *in* Ambrose and Arnaud, 2008) that individuals can be influenced not only by allocations, but also by the formulation of information that leads to the allocation. Thibaut and Walker (1975, 1978, *in* Ambrose and Arnaud, 2008) then introduce the concept of **procedural justice** by bringing closer social psychology and the law. In the context of conflict resolution during the inquisitorial proceedings, an optimal distribution of control is a necessary condition for procedural justice (Thibaut and Walker, 1975, *in* Colquitt et al., 2008). A distinction is made between the control of the decision and the control of the process (Thibaut and Walker, 1978, *in* Colquitt et al., 2008). Similarly, Folger and Cropanzano (1998) associate procedural justice to the “voice”, that is to say the ability to control the process. In the context of the organization, Greenberg and Folger (1983, *in* Colquitt et al., 2008) investigate the effects of the choices made and the voice given to participants on the employees' reactions (see also Leventhal, Karuza and Fry, 1980 *in* Colquitt et al., 2008; Leventhal, 1976, 1980 *in* Folger and Cropanzano, 1998).

Procedural justice induces cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions that are positive for the organization (e.g., organizational commitment, Martin and Bennett, 1996; Trust in superiors, Folger and Konovsky, 1989) and mitigates the negative responses to an unfavorable or unfair outcome of distributive justice (Greenberg, 1987b, *in* Greenberg 1993a).

While the first conceptions of procedural justice focus on the procedure itself, other studies emphasize the way these procedures are applied and the relations induced by them. This leads researchers to propose a third dimension of justice called **relational or interactional justice**. Lind and Tyler's theory of group values (1988, *in* Colquitt et al., 2008) later named relational model (Tyler & Lind, 1992; Colquitt et al., 2008) states that people attach value to long-term group relationships, because belonging to a group is a way to obtain a social status and self-respect. According to them, these social relations are evaluated through three dimensions: neutrality, trust and standing (Tyler, 1989 *in* Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997). Those dimensions would influence the degree to which people see authority as legitimate and, more generally, the judgments of procedural justice. This model provides an additional explanation of the effects of interpersonal treatment in the context of the study of procedural justice (Lind & Tyler, 1988 *in* Colquitt et al., 2008). Lind and Tyler (1988 *in* Colquitt et al., 2008) suggest

that when the procedures and interactions are consistent with the group's values, they will be considered fair by their members.

Greenberg (1993b) considers interactional justice as an extension of procedural justice that he thus conceives as having two dimensions: an interpersonal dimension, referring to the quality of the relationships in the organization, and an informational dimension, referring to the provision of information and explanations regarding the decision. However, there are difficulties in making a clear distinction between the concept of procedural and interactional justice. About this, Cohen-Charash and Spector (2001) point out that these two concepts of justice are closely related, yet distinct.

Recent empirical studies seem to confirm the existence of this third interactional dimension in the conceptualization of organizational justice (Ambrose & Arnaud, 2008; Cohen, Charash and Spector, 2001; Colquitt, 2001; Bies, 2001, 2008). Interactional justice would thus refer to the social dimensions of justice, to the **process of communication** between the source and the receiver of justice such as, for instance, politeness, honesty or respect (Tyler and Bies, 1990 in Cohen and Spector Charash , 2001).

Interactional justice would be particularly attached to the person who conveys the information. Thus, interactional justice refers to the relationships between the employee and the supervisor while procedural justice refers to the relationships between the employees and the organization (Cropanzano et al., 2002; Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001). Bies (2008), studies interactional justice in daily organizational interactions that he calls “encounters” (Bies, 2001, p. 96). Resuming Greenberg’s distinction of interactional justice in two dimensions (1993b, interpersonal justice - informational justice), he argues that these daily exchanges refer to these two dimensions. Impending changes, bad news (e.g. layoffs) are examples of information that are exchanged in the interactions of informational nature whereas interpersonal interactions are also likely to be the scene of unfulfilled promises (Bies 2001) or insults (Cropanzano and Ambrose, 2001).

The relationship between judgments of organizational justice and organizational behavior

Organizational justice is based on individual perceptions and judgments. These perceptions and judgments are formed by the cognitive framework of each individual, a framework that creates normative expectations and forms the basis of value judgments (Mather and Yngvesson, 1981). As soon as the 1960s, studies have shown the impact that feelings of

justice and injustice have on most attitudes and behaviors at work (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997 in Nadisic, 2008). For Rawls (1971, in Greenberg, 1990a), justice is the first virtue of social institutions. Social scientists must recognize the ideals of justice as a basic necessity for the effective functioning of organizations and the personal satisfaction of individuals working there (Moore, 1978, in Greenberg, 1990a). Positive judgments of justice can improve organizational outcomes (Colquitt et al., 2001, Martin and Bennett, 1996). Fair procedures promote the achievement of outcomes (Thibaut and Walker, 1975, in Cropanzano et al., 2001a). From a similar perspective, Greenberg (1994) considers that interactional justice has a decisive influence on the acceptance of difficult decisions by employees.

The perceived injustice results, however, in reactions of withdrawal, absenteeism and emotional pain (Homans, 1961; Folger and Cropanzano, 1998; Colquitt et al., 2002; Gellathly, 1995, in Coulon et al ., 2008). Research indicates that individuals tend to react very negatively to processes they perceive as unfair (Gilliland, 1993). Fox et al. (2001) speak of counterproductive behavior such as passive attitudes of not following instructions, acts of aggression, delinquency (Hogan and Hogan, 1989) or revenge (Bies, Tripp, and Kramer, 1997).

In the case of a procedure perceived as unfair, the reactions of individuals are directed to the organization as a whole (Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001). This shows that procedural justice is closely linked to the evaluation of the system or to institutional characteristics. The distributive injustice in turn makes it difficult to meet the instrumental needs of the members of the organization, for they feel they do not receive the material benefits they feel they deserve. Greenberg (1990b) has managed to show that interactional justice can reduce the negative effects that arise from unfair distribution procedures and decisions.

While many studies have investigated the various dimensions of justice independently of each other, some studies seek to understand the interrelationships between these different dimensions.

1. 2. The overall concepts of organizational justice: Towards global, processual and contextual models.

Cropanzano et al. (2001a) summarize the different dimensions of justice by suggesting they rely on three conceptions of the individual: **an instrumental model** that sees individuals as primarily motivated by their personal interests; **a relational model** which proposes that people are motivated by their desire to increase their self-esteem and to preserve their identity

by belonging to a group; **a model of moral virtue** in which individuals are motivated by the respect for human dignity. Greenberg (2001a), as for him, points out that these three ways are all inspired by the same source: personal interest. He (2001c, p. 251-252) adds, however, that self-interest alone is not enough to explain justice perceptions and reactions to injustice. Thus, researchers have concentrated on the relationship between the different dimensions of justice previously defined. Two approaches can be distinguished: a combinatorial approach, on the one hand, a heuristic or processual approach on the other.

Combinatory models

Some authors thus seek to build models and theories that would examine the effects of multiple dimensions of organizational justice by combining them. Folger (1986 *in* Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan, 2008) thus proposes to replace the theory of equity through an integrative model. Lind *et al.* (1993), Lind (2001), Leventhal (1980, *in* Ambrose and Arnaud, 2008), with different mechanisms, recognize the importance of combined judgments of justice, thus forming the basis of personal attitudes and behaviors. Leventhal (1980, *in* Ambrose and Arnaud, 2008) suggests in turn that the overall judgment of justice would result from a weighted assessment of distributive and procedural rules.

Heuristics and 'global' models

Referent cognitions. Folger and Cropanzano (1998, 2001) incorporate the concepts and theories of the literature of justice by relying on the theory of referent cognitions (Folger, 1987, 1993) which stipulates that the individuals feel injustice when they perceive themselves being disadvantaged compared to a reference point (Folger 1986, p. 147 *in* Colquitt *et al.*, 2008).

The individual, in order to assess what is happening, makes a mental comparison with what could have happened. These thoughts are referent cognitions. This theory is a reconceptualization of the equity theory that incorporates elements of distributive justice (outcome referents) and procedural and interactional justice (the elements of justification). The essence of this model is the allocation of a responsibility based on three judgments arising from answers to conflicting questions (called counterfactuals and that induce a comparison with three standards): What could have happened? What could happen? What should happen? These contradictory questions are asked on the three components of the act or event: its effect on the material or psychological well-being of the individual, the existence of a responsible and the principles that led to the outcomes (Folger and Cropanzano, 2001).

Individuals change and replace mentally some facts by others in a contradictory perspective (Roese, 1997, in Folger and Cropanzano, 2001) that consist in alternative scenarios compared to the one that actually took place. Thus, each central judgment is made after comparing reality with the corresponding aspect of the scenario that is contrary to the fact.

With this general model, researchers emphasize the fact that the three dimensions of justice share similar terms of reasoning. On this basis, they suggest matrix representations (Folger and Cropanzano, 2001, p. 32-33) of the formation of judgments of justice including the three types of standards of judgments of justice, and two types (economic, socio-emotional) of benefits. These models emphasize similarities and complementarities between the different theories of organizational justice.

Justice heuristics. Lind (2001) in his theory of the psychology of judgments of justice first states that judgments of justice serve as substitutes for interpersonal trust in cooperation decisions in such a way that individuals use cognitive shortcuts to have judgments of justice at the time of the decision. This theory known as fairness heuristics suggests that the different experiences of justice all contribute to the development of **a global judgment of justice** that guides the individual interpretations, attitudes and behaviors in future events relating to justice. With this theory, Lind (2001) tries to explain why judgments of justice have such a great influence on attitudes and behaviors: individuals can clearly make a distinction between the sources of the types of justice, but what drives the behavior is a perception of global justice. Individuals would face a social dilemma between their personal investment of time and resources in a social and organizational relationship which is likely to result on a reward on the one hand, and on the possibility of being exploited, denied or losing one's identity, on the other hand. People solve this social dilemma on a daily basis by using impressions of justice as a heuristic device. Impressions of justice are used as a guideline regulating behavior in different social relations. Colquit and Shaw (2008) add that the heuristics justice are direct measures formed quickly, in an almost unconscious manner, with the information available at the time. There is no systematic and careful evaluation of the various informations.

The judgment of justice used as a heuristic to decide whether or not to get involved in the organization is a global judgment of **how someone has been treated**, and provides information on procedural and distributive elements. Based on this model, some research (Van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt, and Wilke, 1997 and Van den Bos, Wilke, Lind, and Vermunt,

1998 *in* Lind, 2001) has shown the role of substitutability in the formation of judgments of justice: When other types of information are absent, evaluations of procedural justice are the most effective to form judgments of justice. Procedural and interactional justice would then have a great heuristic value. As for Brockner (2002) and Lind (2001), they emphasize that interactional justice serves as a heuristic value in determining the fairness of organizational procedures and the reliability of the decision makers.

Formation of the judgments of justice. Some authors have investigated the process of forming judgments of justice. Judgments of justice would proceed in two steps (Cropanzano and Folger, 1991, Folger, 1986, *in* Cropanzano and Konovsky, 1996): a break in the flow of events (*failure event*, Bies, Shapiro, Cummings, 1988 *in* Konovsky and Cropanzano, 1996), followed by a search for explanations (Cropanzano and Konovsky, 1996) which would lead (or not) on a judgment of justice (Greenberg, 1990a). Van den Bos et al. (2001, *in* Cropanzano et al., 2001b) also suggest a model in two phases including the production of a judgment of justice then a phase of using these judgments. These studies particularly emphasize on the role of frames of reference prior to the formation of judgments of justice. These elements invite us to carefully consider the context in which these judgments are formed.

1. 3. Synthesis. Research contributions and limits of the theories of organizational justice.

The most recent work on organizational justice all emphasize in their own way the role of context in the process of formation of these judgments, a context that is apprehended through both the notions of uncertainty and cultural and normative referents on which individuals rely to form their judgments. Deeply enriched in comparison to the first studies on justice, the proposed conceptualizations struggle however to formalize the process of forming judgments of justice and thereby obscure its social dimension.

Contributions. The role of context. For Van den Bos and Lind (2002), when the social or cognitive conditions are **uncertain**, the judgments of justice have a huge impact on people's reactions. Similarly, the analysis of the heuristics of justice suggests that justice concerns are particularly important during turbulent and uncertain times (Van den Bos and Lind, 2004). During these times, people form their judgments of justice, taking into account the

information most relevant to their particular situation. Most of the time, however, individuals lack information and will use other information: substitute heuristics.

In times of organizational change, uncertainty dominates, the past serves as referent to expectations, and individuals become very cautious (Folger and Skarlicki, 1999). Social interactions are marked by a heightened awareness to hidden meanings and tacit objectives (Janis, 1983). One can assume that the same event (a decision to reorganize for example) may simultaneously affect the different dimensions of justice: a redefinition of the roles of the actors, for example, roles that are attached to symbolic and instrumental benefits can lead to judgments of distributive justice; the negotiation process with the actors that are involved and the decision modalities - can affect judgments of procedural justice; and the way the reorganization is handled will result in judgments of interactional justice. Thus, organizational change is likely to involve high stakes for the actors, while the outlines of these issues often remain unclear. Employees feeling threatened may adopt attitudes of resistance to change, a means for employees to exercise their power to restore justice in the existing rapports (Jermiers *et al.*, 1994).

During the change, the perceptions and judgments of justice can be influenced not only by the availability of the perceived information or uncertainty, but also **by the cultural context** of the organization. Cultural values, social norms and customs, as referent or standard cognitions affect the judgments of justice (Greenberg, 2001b). Greenberg (1993a) notes that if certain procedures such as the provision of voice in the distribution of outcomes is widely recognized as an act of good justice in various cultures, it can still not be described as being fair, especially when the use of this voice is usual or expected (Greenberg *et al.*, 1990, *in* Greenberg, 1993a). The contextual dimension, alongside **processual dimensions** previously outlined in the formation of judgments of justice, constitutes a major obstacle to the use of standard measures (Greenberg, 1993a) to assess the perceptions of justice.

Limits. Still too static and individualized an understanding. If recent theories went beyond fragmentary or combinatory approaches of justice, they cannot account for the formation process of the judgment of justice. The introduction of the heuristics of justice, for instance, has been an effort to develop a global conceptualization of the judgment of justice (Lind, 2001). However, this perspective does not allow a detailed and accurate understanding of the formation of judgments of justice. Uncertainty exists and pushes individuals to rely on heuristics, but the question of how these heuristics are formed is not addressed. A detailed

analysis of the factors that come into play in the formation of these judgments of justice would be needed here. In a similar perspective, Lind, Kray and Thompson (1998) consider that the heuristics are resistant to change, which seems to us a limited vision given the multiple influences the judgments of justice are submitted to in organizations. More fundamentally, Lind (2001) sees heuristics as *prêt-à-penser* and says nothing about the context that triggers and influences judgments of justice, nor does he specify how the heuristic are formed and / or change over time.

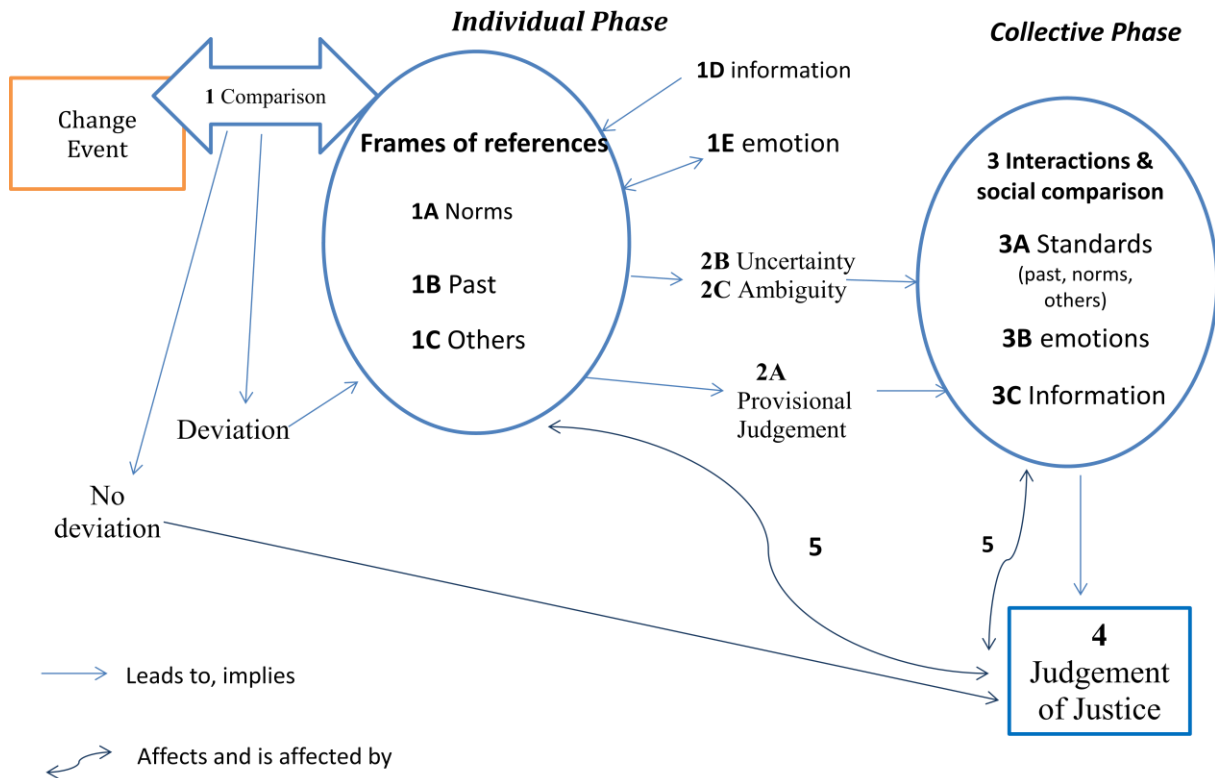
Referent cognitions theory (Folger and Cropanzano, 1998; 2001) details the phases of the formation of judgments of justice and can be seen as another theory aspiring to integrate the different dimensions of organizational justice. However, Greenberg (2001a) regrets the lack of precision in this theory regarding what exactly determines the judgments of justice: Which one or which ones of the three questions of counter evidence determine(s) the judgment ?

This theory, such as the theory of heuristics, finally remains silent on the social dimensions of the process of the formation of the judgment of organizational justice. The theories of organizational justice, more generally, favor a cognitive reading of justice and neglect the emotional and social processes at work in the formation of the judgments of justice.

2. Proposition of an exploratory model for the formation of organizational judgment of justice when confronted to change.

We propose a model (see Figure 1. below) that underlines the social and processual aspects of the formation of the judgment of justice in organizations. Following sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), we consider that the daily interactions of individuals in the organization, their opinions, the stories, the anecdotes, the images exchanged between the actors, are the privileged medium through which they make sense and account for events and of the world around them, and that these interpretations and explanations they develop contribute to the formation of judgments of organizational justice.

Figure 1. Process of the formation of organizational judgment of justice when confronted to change.



2. 1. Individual phase of sensemaking.

Confrontation of events to frame of reference (step 1).

A change may be equal to a situation that Louis and Sutton (1991, p.70) refer to as *business as usual*: The event goes unnoticed, there is no gap between the event and the individual frame of reference. The event is unlikely to give rise to the formation of a judgment of justice. Interactions and routine actions are not questioned (Barr and Huff, 1997).

If an event is perceived as being different from *business as usual*, as a deviation from the routine order of the organization (i.e. a failure, a new decision, an interruption, or situations where the actors' attention is deliberately drawn by others on something, Louis and Sutton, 1991, p. 60), the individuals will seek to make sense of what is happening (Weick, 1979, 1995). Such situations mark a break in the "continued stream of events" (Weick, 1995, p. 100). Because things are not how they should be and because this new situation goes on and has importance (Smith 1988, p. 1491, in Weick, 1995), individuals feel the need to understand it and make sense of it. The individual is facing a cognitive disorder. He starts acting more consciously (Fiske and Taylor, in Balogun and Johnson, 2004).

These two different sensemaking processes underline the importance of prior **frames of reference** in the detection (or not) of a deviation, a gap which will cause the process of sensemaking and forming judgments of justice. The frames of reference or schemas are defined as the set of general and coherent views as well as beliefs and standards of received social judgments. For Fiske and Taylor (1991), frames of reference are thematically distinct groups of knowledge that constitute cognitive structures in which generic concepts derived from experiences or events are stored (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart and Ortony, 1977 *in* Balogun and Johnson, 2004). We can compare this notion with the one of **schemas** (Poole et al., 1989 *in* Balogun and Johnson, 2004) that are the basis on which individuals rely in order to develop knowledge, assign meanings and make comparisons.

In order to form a judgment, individuals assess situations by referring to the reference points of their frame of reference (Rutte and Messick, 1995) that are “well-defined anchor points” (Cantril, 1941, p. 20). Individuals face multiple reference points (Rutte and Messick, 1995), i.e. different **referent cognitions** that will form the set of all frames of reference of individuals from which individuals will engage in the first phase of judgements (step 1). The perception of a situation by a person is formed by or through his prior frames of reference through. Theories of social justice underline that the judgment of justice is due to a cognitive evaluation of a situation (Organ and Moorman, 1993) **through comparisons between facts and one or several standards** (Kulik and Abrose, 1992). Drawing on the literature, we can distinguish three important types of cognitive referents.

First, the **norms** are an important cognitive referent (**1A**). Sherif (1935, p. 17-22 *in* Perrin, 2010, *our translation*) defines them as “an evaluative scale indicating an acceptable latitude and and unacceptable latitude for behavior, activities, events, beliefs, or any other matter concerning the members a social unit.” These are elements that are taken for granted which are transmitted to individuals (Cantrill, 1941, p. 19-20), and that will be useful in their evaluations as anchor points for their judgments of what is fair or unfair. Norms are descriptive, and express what is normal to do or think, or injunctive and express what is accepted or reprobated (Cialdini et al., 1990, p. 1015 *in* Perrin, 2010).

Greenberg (2001b) adds that perceptions of justice may differ according to the internalized norms and values. By values, Greenberg refers to the received culture of the individuals: A national, local, familial and even organizational culture. The subjective valence that individuals assign to actions and to outcomes of behaviors is thus related to the personal

values of these individuals (Feather, 1994). Cultural values, social norms and customs, as referent cognitions or standards therefore affect judgments of justice.

Secondly, **the past (1B)** of individuals is another component of the frameworks of individuals that works as a referent to the expectations and questions of the individuals. The personal past experiences and information influence the reactions and responses of organizational members (Tyler et al., 1997). For instance, trust in an authority figure stemming from his past actions, may cause that his actions to be seen as being fair (Van den Bos, Wilke, and Lind, 1998). Organizational members relate to their experiences (Goodman, 1974), in a similar context or another one, in the same position or a different one. O'Neill and Mone (2005) suggest that members of the organization who have a high level of self-efficacy would compare more readily to themselves than to others. Individuals also compare results or past procedures with those of the present. This comparison is likely to induce a feeling of deviation, leading to the formation of a judgment of justice or injustice (Crosby, 1984 in DeGoey, 2000).

Thirdly, the individual can choose someone else as referent: An individual internal or external to the organization, a particular class of individuals (Greenberg et al., 2007), an individual from the industry, a friend or an ideal. **(1C)**. He can also choose a referent among those who are in a higher or lower position in relation to the subject of the comparison. Individuals generally prefer comparisons with those ranking higher and with their peers (Martin, 1981). Studies have also shown that individuals use multiple referents, and thus make multiple comparisons at the same time (Goodman, 1974, 1977, in O'Neill and Mone, 2005). The chosen referent or referents depend on the problem at stake (Hills, 1980; Ronen, 1986 in O'Neill and Mone, 2005) and vary over space and time (Goodman, 1974).

In this phase where the individual is alone with himself, he also takes into account his social environment. Any sign of the environment is then likely to influence the personal judgments of justice of individuals **(ID, IE)**. To begin with, the individual phase is influenced by **available information (ID)** in the immediate environment of the individual. Cultural components of the context of the organization or of the wider environment may be examples of this. This information attracts the attention of the actors on salient aspects, allowing them to complete the sensemaking process. The order in which the information is presented to the individual during this evaluation phase is important because people will pay more attention to

the information that is presented first (see Van den Bos, 2008 *in* Wiethoff and Greenberg, 2008).

On the other hand, research on organizational justice have highlighted the important link between fairness perceptions and emotions (Folger, 1986, 1987) (**1E**). For Bies and Trip (1996), the emotion has an important role in the personal evaluation of justice. On the one hand, in fact, the perception of a gap and a judgment of injustice may cause negative emotions such as anger or fear (DeGoe, 2000). But on the other hand, Sher and Heise (1993, *in* DeGoe 2000) show that the emotion triggered by an event results in interpretations of justice in relation with emotions. We conclude from this that the intensity of the initial emotion that arises before or during the cognition of an injustice can determine the intensity and the result of the activity of sensemaking and the related judgments of justice. At the end of this phase of comparison between the event and the frame of reference, several outcomes are possible.

Temporary judgment.

The process can lead to the formation of an individual judgment on the justice or injustice of the events (**step 2 A**). The sensemaking stops there and the judgment is formed, at least temporarily ; Either because there are ultimately no deviations or because the deviation is unequivocally appreciated as being favorable or unfavorable to the individual and is the subject of a clarified explanation: the proposed reorganization is unfair / fair because it will lead to extra work without compensation while the company's situation improves / deteriorates and executive salaries increase / diminish, for example. Research adopting a sociocognitive approach and empirical works on sensemaking in organizations (Weick, 1995; Balogun and Johnson, 2004; 2005) emphasize that the individual in the organization compares his evaluation with those of others. The man in the organization is never alone, he is part of a social environment in which he is constantly in an intersubjective relation with others. For Greenberg and Wiethoff (2008), even if the information may result in a judgment of justice, it is likely that these assessments will continue to build through interactions between organizational members.

Ambiguity and uncertainty

The perceived deviation between the event and the referent cognitions can also lead to uncertainty (**2B**) and / or ambiguity (**2C**). For many authors in the field of organizational

justice (Ashford, 1988; DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998 *in* Allen et al., 2007) and of management, change is characterized by these dimensions of uncertainty and ambiguity (Balogun, Johnson, 2004 ; 2005).

According to Milliken (1987, p.136 *in* Weick, 1995), uncertainty is the perceived inability by individuals to predict something accurately. March (1994, p. 174 *in* Weick, 1995) defines uncertainty as “the imprecision in estimates of future consequences conditional on present actions.” The ignorance and imprecision of the projections (Weick, 1995, p. 96) necessitates seeking new information to develop an understanding of what is happening.

Levine (1985 *in* Weick, 1995) suggests that there is ambiguity¹ when there is more than one possible interpretation to the situation. Ambiguity refers to situations with two or more meanings or explanations (Martin, 1992, p. 134, *in* Weick, 1995) and for which the actor faces a confusion. For Weick (1995, p. 95) reducing confusion involves choosing among the available interpretations. To do this, individuals will engage in social interactions and group discussions.

2. 2. Collective phase of sensemaking. The role of social interactions.

Beliefs, information and emotions.

Many studies emphasize the socially constructed character of judgments of justice (Lind, Kray and Thompson, 1998; Greenberg, 1990c). Talking about justice is a pervasive social phenomenon, influencing the way to judge a situation (DeGoey, 2000, p. 54). For DeGoey (2000), research shows that work attitudes and judgments of justice are sensitive to social cues. During their daily interactions, to cope with their emotional states and to find sources of information, or reduce the perceived ambiguity facing the multiplicity of possible interpretations of what happens, people consciously or unconsciously refer to their entourage.

Other reasons justify continuing the process of sensemaking in a second social phase. First, the individual does not necessarily have a judgment (**Step 2A**). The uncertainty may persist because either the individual does not have sufficient information, or it raises other questions for him. This search for information due to uncertainty is also due to the emotions

¹ For some authors, ambiguity also includes a lack of information and requires a search for new information (Weick, 1995, p. 95), especially when the situation is complex.

and anxiety aroused by justice issues. Individuals feel the need to make sense and require the support of others (DeGoey, 2000).

Secondly, ambiguity may persist (**Step 2C**) following the individual assessment. According to Weick (1995), it is the ambiguity of a situation that makes intersubjectivity necessary. These interpretations can also be contradictory, pushing people into ambivalence (Weick, 1995). Individuals would like to reduce the confusion of the new situation due to ambiguity and / or ambivalence felt (Weick, 1995). Finally, the individual may be unable to obtain a final judgment on the degree of justice of the change (**Step 2A**).

For many theories in social psychology (Ash, 1956; Festinger, 1954; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), the individual will consider its social environment to find information that will help to overcome the uncertainty and ambiguity felt. Individuals, during their interactions (**step 3**), exchange, discuss and reassess their usual frames of reference, the internal cues, the cognitive and emotional information of the environment, and reference points. Balogun and Johnson (2004) show that it is mainly through social processes that individuals will develop new interpretative schemas that will enable them to make sense of change.

Sensemaking - the process through which individuals will make sense of what happens during change (Weick, 1995) - continues to operate as an interactional sociocognitive process through interactions, negotiations, conversations (Bean and Eisenberg, 2006; Burrell and Morgan, 1979 *in* Brown and Humphreys, 2003) and processes of interpretation and production of meanings (eg Weick, 1995, *in* Brown and Humphreys, 2003). Thus, the individual with his provisional judgment and / or his multiple interpretations turns to his environment. The formation of the judgment of justice acquires a social dimension which is largely obscured by theoretical and empirical works on organizational justice (Lind Kray and Thompson, 1998).

All forms of social commitments such as action, speech, formal or informal, verbal or nonverbal exchange in the daily organization, are privileged medium through which individuals develop meanings and form their judgment of justice.

Organizational members thus share their opinions and emotions (DeGoey, 2000). These exchanges are necessary because people rely on others to help them define reality in ambiguous circumstances (Festinger, 1954; Weick, 1969) and have a more appropriate understanding of the situation. Every opportunity to exchange gossip, rumors, and stories or

discuss in friendship networks are means of sharing and comparing cognitions, emotions and opinions (Van Maanen, 1992).

More specifically, members of the organization can **compare their reference points** to those of others (**step 3A**). Comparisons can be made directly with a peer or indirectly through a joint relationship with a third party (Meyer, 1994; Johanson, 2000). Some studies show that these comparisons are more readily made with individuals with whom the bonds of friendship and trust are closer. Undoubtedly, individuals seek above all supporters to their problems. Similarly, they have a tendency to choose peers to test their reference points and make comparisons (DeGoey, 2000). These processes are generally motivated by two types of quests: that of a sponsor who can provide social support to someone who has suffered an injustice, and that of a person with whom to test assumptions or judgments previously formed (DeGoey, 2000). Individuals in situations of uncertainty seek support, want to avoid rejection (Buunk, 1990) and to receive empathy (Roloff, 1987 in DeGoey, 2000).

Individuals in this interactional phase of sensemaking compare their reference points (Hartman and Johnson, 1989). Interpersonal social comparison (**phase 3**) is an almost inevitable social interaction (Brickman and Bulman, 1977, p. 150 *in* Brown et al., 2007). Interpersonal information arising from social interaction in the company is made with two types of actors, managers and peers (Lamertz, 2002). Through these interactions they therefore provide new referents, actors are likely to see and even change the referents of their intra-personal comparisons.

Organizational members rely on **the others' accounts** (3A) for situations of injustice they may have experienced (Brockner and Greenberg, 1990) and use them as reference points in the process of collective evaluation. The stories of **past** events (relating to cases of justice or not) (**3A**) constitute social mechanisms through which individuals make comparisons. These stories they refer to facilitate their sensemaking while giving them information to compare their situation to a reference point (Martin, 1982 DeGoey in 2000). The experiences of others, reported interpretations or reinterpretations of past events or actions, may also constitute elements of comparison. These reports may also convey **norms or standards** of comparison (**3A**) which serve as reference points with which actors evaluate their own referents. Having the same experiences or similar ones is a source of **social validation** for justice.

The referents during the interactions are constantly being revised with new elements detected in the social environment. Either this revaluation with new comparisons results in changes in

judgments already stabilized, or it helps to reduce or to eliminate the uncertainty or ambiguity that was persisting. When meeting other referents, individuals have new opportunities for more appropriate comparisons and for completing the formulation of their judgment.

During social interactions, **the exchanged information** also gets an important role (**step 3C**). The information on topics of justice that is provided by others (i.e. justice stories told about the organization in the past, the behavior of actors at work, the habits and behaviors of the hierarchy, the reactions of subordinates in a past discussion, etc..) may change attitudes and behaviors in a given situation (DeGoey, 2000). Schachter (1959 in DeGoey, 2000) argues that actors seek above all people who have experienced the same types of events and the same emotions, or others who can share their doubts about the injustice in question. Information from the environment outside the organization is also determinant in the social assessment of individuals. Individuals form judgments taking into account what happens in another company in the sector, in the industry, or even the economy in general.

Many a research highlights the important part of the **emotion** in the formation of judgments of justice. Emotions directly influence the perceptions and behaviors of individuals (Isen and Baron, 1991 *in* DeGoey, 2000). Research shows that there is also a social comparison of emotional states (**3B**) that becomes inevitable when anxiety increases (DeGoey, 2000). Thus, the type and intensity of emotion can also determine the initial intensity and the result of the sensemaking of individuals. According to DeGoey (2000), social interaction in response to an event related to justice pushes individuals to express their emotions more acutely. These exchanges and comparisons demonstrate the existence of a mutual social influence, that may give rise to phenomena of amplification of emotions and polarization of judgments.

Social influence and contagion.

During their exchanges, individuals are likely, through social influence processes, to change their frames of reference, and thereby reduce the uncertainty they feel (step 3). Social influence, according to the theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954), is similar to a process of information exchange. Social influence is a means through which individuals can reduce areas of uncertainty and ambiguity that prevent the formation of a final judgment. Confronting their frameworks, sharing emotions, information and interpretations on the issues of justice, members of the organization influence each other. Different forms of social influence can be distinguished in the literature (Allard-Poesi, 1998). These different ways of

social influence describe how and in what sense the frames of reference will be influenced and will give rise to a judgment.

Following the works of Moscovici, Allard-Poesi (1998) conceives social influence as a process of socio-cognitive conflict and negotiation in interactions. She distinguishes three main types of social influence. Compliance is studied by Asch (1956). It is characterized by the change of opinion or behavior of an individual in the direction of the majority of his group. Individuals conform their views to those of the majority. Normatization, defined by Sherif (1936), leads to a compromise between the initial positions of the group members. The members' views converge toward an average position. Polarization is a mechanism through which individuals, through exchanges, conflicts and negotiations are likely to discover that they share norms and values on which they will rely in forming their judgment. In this case, extreme judgments are liable to take place.

While these three modalities of influence emphasize the role of cognitive frameworks and social exchanges, DeGoey uses the metaphor of contagion to underline the role of emotions in the context of social influence on judgments of organizational justice. Contagion can be considered as a special case of social influence. In fact, the approach by a contagion effect highlights the commitment of organizational actors in social discourse with peers to make sense of an event (DeGoey, 2000). While organizational members are motivated to talk about the meaning of situations, contagion occurs also at the level of emotions (3B). Because they are inherently stressful with potentially serious consequences, change stimulates the awakening of feelings before or during the cognitive assessment. Individuals, in order to cope with this stress and anxiety caused by the change, seek social support for a shared understanding of injustice, and comfort each other. The fact of conversing on the unfair event and thus exhibiting emotions result in a validation of emotional reactions to the event. Schachter (1959 DeGoey in 2000) underlines that emotional uncertainty leads individuals to search for social validation. Camaraderie or friendship can reduce the level of anxiety (Schachter, 1959 *in* DeGoey 2000), but it should be noted that other studies show an increased level of anxiety when people are interacting (Buunk, 1990).

Through this cognitive and interactional process, the judgment of justice comes to stability, in the *weickien* sense (step 4): individuals converge to an equivalent meaning, that is capable of generating consistent behavioral consequences (that are equivalent), and allowing the coordination of their actions. It is from this shared meaning that the judgment stabilizes. In

fact, this stabilized judgment can be modified later because of ongoing interactions between members of the organization, but also under the influence of frameworks that are modified (**step 5**). The frames of reference change, a new evaluation phase begins, and so on.

Conclusion

Organizational change induces a high sensitivity on issues of justice (Baron et al., 1996), and this when ambiguity and uncertainty are ruling (Ashford, 1988; DiFonzo and Bordia, 1998). Individuals want to overcome this ambiguity and uncertainty, give a sense to what is happening, and judge what is right and what is not. How do individuals form their judgment when they face organizational change? Through what process of sensemaking ?

Recent theories of organizational justice emphasize the role of cognitive and cultural context in the formation of judgments of justice and agree on considering periods of change as propitious moments to questionings in organizations. However the theories struggle to model the process through which the judgment is formed and to consider the role of social processes in this context.

Considering the formation of judgments of organizational justice as a process of sensemaking, our model shows that formation as a set of phases incorporating social, cultural and contextual dimensions: the roles of the event of change, referent cognitions from which judgments of justice emerge, ambiguity and uncertainty, interactions and conversations between actors are particularly emphasized.

This model contributes to theories of organizational justice in several ways. Following Lind and Van den Bos (2002), it describes the process of forming the judgment of justice considering it comprises an individual but also a collective phase, a point that is rarely emphasized by the theories of organizational justice. It integrates and deploys a conception enriched with the context in which the judgment is formed. Indeed, by context, we hear not only the uncertainty and ambiguity resulting from the introduction of change, but also the cultural, historical and social referents that people use to form their judgments of justice. The context also includes interactions through which individuals develop an intersubjective understanding and will attain a temporarily stabilized judgment of justice.

Finally, our research constitutes a first attempt to integrate two theoretical fields, which, though tackling increasingly the issue of organizational change, remained far apart: organizational justice on the one hand, organizational sensemaking on the other.

The proposed theoretical model is not without limits. It separates the process of forming a judgment on an individual phase and a collective one, while these two steps are carried out probably almost simultaneously in the daily life of organizations. Even though the proposed model contains emotional, cultural and social aspects, it is based on the conceptual frameworks of sensemaking and organizational justice and so certainly adopts some of their limits, among which an insufficient consideration of the phenomena of power at play in the interaction and the sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005) and their impact on the judgments of justice.

The testing of the proposed model through an in depth longitudinal study of an organization undergoing change, is therefore a research priority in appreciating the limits and therefore enriching the developed model.

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