Understanding Employees' Reactions to the Management of Change: An Exploration through an Organisational Justice Framework

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Introduction

Implementation of change in organisations is often problematic. This is especially likely to be the case where such change involves people, and where personal relationships and emotional responses predominate (McCalman and Paton, 1992). Organisational change is often perceived by individuals as threatening (Mabey and Salaman, 1995) and is likely to meet with resistance, requiring careful implementation to overcome fears associated with negative perceptions. Consequently, perceptions about the need for and nature of organisational change, the way in which this change has been implemented and the outcomes, will influence employees' reactions. Given the relative paucity of research into the reasons for such employee reactions, there is a need to explore and understand these aspects of organisational change.

Organisational justice theory offers a framework through which to explore and understand employee reactions to organisational change more fully. Organisational justice integrates the outcomes of organisational change with (i) the methods used to achieve it and (ii) perceptions about the treatment of those affected. Three types of organisational justice theory have been identified in the literature (Greenberg, 1987; Folger and Cropanzano, 1998). The first relates to employee perceptions of outcome fairness, which Homans (1961)

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labelled "distributive justice". The second type is labelled "procedural justice" (Thibaut and Walker, 1975). This focuses on employee perceptions of the fairness of procedures used to make decisions, such as those to plan for and implement change. The third type of organisational justice theory is labelled "interactional justice" (Bies and Moag, 1986). This concerns employee perceptions about the fairness of the interpersonal treatment that they receive during the implementation of change.

Organisational change is likely to produce a complex range of reactions to, and even conflicting attitudes about, a particular change scenario. Organisational justice theory is used in this paper (i) as a means to explore such complexity in relation to the range of emotional reactions that may result and (ii) to understand why the reactions of different participants in the same change process may be in conflict. For example, for some employees, the process and outcome of change may be perceived as positive, whereas for others it may be perceived as negative. This contrast may be evident in relation to a common outcome; for example, in relation to an organisational change such as restructuring.

In the paper, we commence by conceptualising organisational justice theory in relation to change. Using a case study drawn from a United Kingdom (UK) public sector organisation, we then examine positive and negative employee reactions within the framework of organisational justice theory. These, and the reasons for them, are used subsequently to evaluate the theory's underlying constructs. We conclude with a discussion about the implications of the resulting analysis for organisational justice theory and the practice implications for organisations, and we reflect briefly on the limitations of this study and directions for future research. Throughout the paper, we have avoided any reference to the literature on organisational emotions *per se*, choosing to focus on the utility of organisational justice theory for understanding and managing employees' reactions to change, and the implications of our study for this theory's constructs.

Conceptualising Organisational Justice

Organisational justice theory focuses on perceptions of fairness in organisations (Greenberg, 1987). It seeks to categorise and to explain the views and feelings of organisational participants about their own treatment and that of others within an organisation. Cropanzano and Greenberg (1997) point out that organisational justice theory is therefore descriptive in nature. It does not seek to prescribe how

justice may be achieved. Instead, it is concerned with understanding the subjectively-held perceptions of organisational participants that result from the outcomes of decisions taken in an organisation, the procedures and processes used to arrive at these decisions and their implementation.

Organisational justice has developed to offer explanatory and predictive theories in relation to each of these issues. Employees' perceptions about the outcomes of decisions taken in an organisation and their responses to these form the basis of distributive justice (Homans, 1961; Leventhal, 1976). Perceptions about the fairness of the processes used to arrive at, and to implement, organisational decisions form the basis of two types of justice theory that are often treated as one in the literature – procedural and interactional justice (for example, Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997). We consider each of these types of organisational justice in turn.

Distributive Justice

Organisational decisions affect the allocation of resources and the nature of outcomes in organisations. Distributive justice is concerned with perceptions of fairness about organisational allocations and outcomes. In this sense, the concept of distributive justice provides the basis of an analytical framework that can be used to understand the perceptions of those affected in relation to many different types of organisational allocations and outcomes. Cropanzano and Greenberg (1997) and Folger and Cropanzano (1998) provide useful reviews of literature, using this theory to analyse perceptions of outcome fairness and their implications in relation to recruitment and selection, performance appraisal, conflict management, downsizing and layoffs - and other organisational outcomes.

Such perceptions of fairness about organisational allocations and outcomes are largely reactive in nature (Greenberg, 1987). Homans (1961) conceived distributive justice as a situation where the outcomes of a social exchange are proportional to the costs incurred or investments made. Perceptions about outcome fairness will be formulated in relation to such an assessment. Thus, a managerial job allocation arising from a situation of organisational change would clearly be seen as fairer by others, where they perceived this as recognition of the appointed person's experience, previous effort, achievement, and suitability for the intended role. Such an allocation would be likely to be seen as unfair by others, where it arose simply as the result of favouritism.

Adams (1965) proposed that feelings of inequity would arise where the ratio of a person's outcomes in relation to their inputs from an exchange were perceived as disproportionate, as the result of a comparison with others. The significance of this comparison with others and the ways in which this may be formulated are discussed later. This theory allows for the recognition of positive and negative forms of inequity. Perceptions of unfairness may lead to positive inequity, where the person experiencing this state feels that others had a greater claim to a particular reward or outcome compared to himself or herself. It has been suggested that this may lead to the person feeling guilty. Alternatively, the person experiencing this state may undertake a revaluation of their contribution, to alleviate this feeling. On the other hand, perceptions of unfairness may lead to negative inequity where those experiencing this feel that they had a greater claim to a particular reward or outcome in relation to the person receiving this benefit, leading to feelings of anger and possibly alienation. A number of potentially adverse behavioural reactions may follow from this perception such as reduced job performance, embarking on the use of withdrawal behaviours such as absenteeism, and reduced co-operation (Folger and Cropanzano, 1998).

More generally, the distribution of particular outcomes between occupational groups is also likely to affect perceptions of fairness in relation to their differential treatment. For example, there is likely to be an implication for distributive justice where negative outcomes of organisational change, such as layoffs and increases in workload, disproportionately affect non-managerial employees and where managers are seen (largely) to avoid these types of outcome (Brockner, 1992). This type of scenario is likely to lead to perceptions of inequity and distributive injustice. It emphasises that the concept of distributive justice may be applied to situations where organisational outcomes, such as job losses or increased workload, are negative, and where there is an issue about the distribution of such outcomes.

The nature of perceived inequity or injustice will lead to different types of employee reactions. As we have seen, an outcome perceived as a benefit for one person or some people may lead to perceived unfairness and feelings of positive inequity (from the benefited person) and negative inequity (from others). Punishments or other negative outcomes for those adversely affected (such as disciplinary action, job loss or failure to achieve promotion) may also generate perceptions of unfairness and negative inequity, where these are

perceived by the subject of the decision to be unjust. Not surprisingly, studies undertaken in relation to distributive justice have found that those affected are more satisfied by outcomes that they judge as being fair than by outcomes that they judge as being unfair (for example, Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997).

A key question therefore relates to the causes of perceptions about distributive justice: What factors influence employees' perceptions about whether an outcome is seen as fair or unfair, and whether such perceptions are strongly or weakly felt? As referred to earlier in relation to the development to distributive justice, perceptions will be largely based on comparisons with others (Adams, 1965; Greenberg, 1987; Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997). Conversely, perceptions about outcome fairness are not just related to an absolute measure (for example, that equity will automatically and only arise in relation to the more money or better treatment a person receives) but will also be based on one or more relative, social comparisons. These are termed referent comparisons or standards. However, this raises a supplementary question about how such referent standards are chosen and made. A number of formulations of such standards have been advanced in the literature. A person's perception of outcome fairness may be derived through comparison with specific others working near by. For example, an employee may compare her or his treatment during a change process by observing the way in which co-workers are treated. This comparison may be more generalised so that the referential standard becomes an external group (Greenberg, 1987), allowing generalised comparisons to be drawn to those who work elsewhere, in relation to a person's occupational group or in a similar type of organisation. More generally still, an employee may make a comparison involving a broader social or societal norm or expectation.

The basis on which organisational decisions are made may help to explain why employees see some organisational outcomes as unfair. Those responsible for making an allocation need to establish a basis for it. A number of bases have been identified in the literature (Leventhal, 1976; Lerner, 1977; Greenberg, 1987; Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997). These include allocations based on the principle of equity, where contribution is recognised and used to decide the nature of an allocation; equality, where an allocation is shared irrespective of contribution; and needs, where an allocation may be divided unequally based on greatest need. Many organisational decisions are ostensibly based on the principle of equity, although

employees observing such allocations may perceive that published business-related criteria do not match their judgements about effective prior performance. This is likely to lead to perceptions of unfairness in relation to resulting outcomes. The use of this principle to make an allocation may have a detrimental effect in a situation requiring the maintenance of group harmony, as an unequal allocation or outcome would threaten this (Deutsch, 1975; Greenberg, 1987). The use of the equity principle may also lead to perceptions of unfairness, where employees' economic needs to maintain organisational membership or current status are threatened by an outcome such as layoffs based on an overriding business need and the pursuit of cost-efficiencies (Brockner and Greenberg, 1990). Organisational communication may play at least some role in helping to alleviate negatively-held perceptions about outcomes, by providing some form of explanation for the decision underpinning an outcome. This leads us to a consideration of procedural justice.

Procedural Justice

Assessments of organisational justice depend not only on perceptions about the fairness of allocations and outcomes but also on perceptions about the procedures used to arrive at such decisions. Procedural justice is concerned with perceptions of fairness about the procedures and processes used to arrive at decisions. Since the conceptual development of procedural justice in the mid-1970s (for example, Thibaut and Walker, 1975; Leventhal, 1976), the importance of this concept for many aspects of human resource management has been recognised (Folger and Cropanzano, 1998). A key finding emerges from numerous studies conducted in different areas of decision-making that affect people in organisations: Decisions based on procedures that are perceived as fair are more likely to be accepted by those they affect, than decisions arising from procedures that are not perceived as fair (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997). Genuinely fair procedures and processes are also likely to moderate the impact of negative reactions that arise from decisions leading to undesirable employee outcomes. For example, whilst use of layoffs is likely to generate negative reactions, Brockner (1990) concluded that genuine procedures to help those being made redundant should help to generate a perception of fairness amongst those who remain in employment. This type of impact has been termed a fair-process effect, where perceptions about the fairness of the process help promote an acceptance of the outcomes

even where these have adverse implications (Folger *et al.*, 1979; Folger and Cropanzano, 1997).

Organisational studies designed to understand the dynamics of procedural justice have focused on the related concepts of voice (Folger, 1977) and process control (Thibaut and Walker, 1975). These concepts are linked to the scope for the subjects of organisational decision making to participate in the process of arriving at, including being able to influence, the decisions that are made. Participation or voice allows those affected to exercise some degree of process control, or personal influence, in relation to the process of reaching a decision (Thibaut and Walker, 1975; Greenberg and Folger, 1983). The ability to exercise process control has been linked to a number of positive attitudinal and behavioural reactions. Davy *et al.* (1991) found that process control affects positively perceptions about fairness and job satisfaction, which in turn influence the level of commitment to the organisation and intention to stay. Other positive attitudinal and behavioural reactions have been reported in the literature arising from perceptions about procedural justice and the exercise of process control, including improved trust in management and some evidence for increased job performance (for a review of sources, see Cropanzano and Folger, 1997). Organisations may therefore seek to engender genuine process control through employee participation to promote perceptions that the process used to arrive at decisions affecting employees is fair (Davy *et al.*, 1991).

Leventhal's (1976; 1980) work details other facets that have been found to promote procedural justice. These relate to: the consistent application of organisational procedures between individuals and across an organisation; the avoidance of self-interest in the application of procedures; accuracy in their use based on reliable information; scope to evaluate the application of procedures and alter outcomes where necessary; allowing for the representation of differing interests during their use; and the adoption of ethical standards through their use. Representation of differing interests during the formulation of organisational procedures may be seen as being related to the concept of voice, although many of these facets suggest a stage beyond the process of formulating such procedures. These facets therefore point towards and suggest a link with the theory of interactional justice, which we discuss in the next sub-section (Folger and Cropanzano, 1998).

In relation to the context of organisational change, Guest and Peccei (1992) evaluated the effects of involvement initiatives used

during the closure of a British Aerospace site and found that an employee involvement strategy eased the process of plant closure. However, they also found that certain groups were less involved with the implementation and, that these employees may have had less favourable perceptions about the fairness of the procedures used.

Interactional Justice

Perceptions about procedural justice related to the way in which decisions are made may be differentiated from justice considerations arising from their implementation. There are two principal aspects to this differentiation. The first of these relates to different stages of the process. Initially, perceptions about procedural justice will arise in relation to the scope for those who are likely to be affected by a decision to be able to exercise voice and to engage in some level of process control. Those affected may develop perceptions about whether the decision-making procedure is just or unjust, depending on whether they were able to exercise voice and whether this was seen to be effective. This perception may inform the way in which they continue to perceive the remainder of the process. However, perceptions of fairness developed at this stage may be altered by the subsequent implementation of the decisions made.

The second aspect of this differentiation therefore relates to the way in which decisions are applied in practice. Decision-makers may intend their decisions to be interpreted and applied in a particular way. However, those charged with applying decisions might interpret and implement them in a way that contravenes the original intention of the decision-makers. This may be related to a lack of clarity about what was intended or because of other reasons – such as contravention of Leventhal's (1976) principles relating to the avoidance of self-interest and the adoption of ethical standards on the part of the implementers. In reality, these principles are idealistic and likely to lead to a range of interpretations. However, where principles such as consistency of treatment and post-implementation evaluation are not adequately applied, it may be that biased implementation leads to perceptions of unfairness and injustice.

The stages between which decisions are formulated and implemented, and the scope for different implementation practices to occur in practice, suggests the need to differentiate between the structural nature of procedural justice and what has been labelled as interactional justice (Bies and Moag, 1986). Interactional justice is thus concerned with perceptions about the fairness of the interpersonal

treatment received by those affected during the implementation of decisions. This has been identified as being composed of two principal elements relating to the explanations and justification offered for decisions made, and the level of sensitivity of treatment of those affected during implementation of decisions.

Justification of organisational decisions through effective explanations has been found to produce an effect similar to that of process control: justification has been related positively to procedural fairness and, in turn, to intention to stay (Daly and Geyer, 1994). This may be explained through the finding that employees are more likely to accept decisions, even unfavourable ones, when given an adequate and genuine reason for it (Brockner *et al.*, 1990; Brockner and Wiesenfeld, 1993; Daly and Geyer, 1994). These findings point to the central role that effective communication may play in a change management context, and are supported by job insecurity theory (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984). Appropriately-focused and effectively-transmitted official organisational communication can help alleviate the sense of powerlessness and perceived threat felt by those who are affected in such a context (Greenhalgh, 1983; Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984; Brockner *et al.*, 1990; Shaw and Barrett-Power, 1997).

Similarly, the way in which people are treated during a period of change has also been found to affect their perceptions about the fairness of the process (Folger and Cropanzano, 1998). This suggests a clear role for line managers in relation to the development of their subordinates' perceptions about fairness. Part of this will involve communicating decisions, providing reasons for these, and how these will affect the future nature of work for all those in the area that they manage. The nature of the way in which these people are treated is therefore likely to have a significant impact on the perceptions that they form about the fairness not only of the process of implementation but also about the decisions that underpin this process.

Interactional justice was introduced as a third and discrete construct of organisational justice. Because it has been seen to produce the same perceptual outcomes as procedural justice, it has more recently been approached as a facet of procedural justice rather than as a separate form of organisational justice (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997). However, the conflation of these two types of organisational justice on the basis of similar perceptual outcomes obscures the possibility of differential outputs, where only one of

these types of justice is perceived as fair. We return to this key aspect in our exploration of the data.

Data Collection

Data collection was undertaken within the context of a case study public sector organisation, which we refer to as "Newcounty". Newcounty had come into existence on 1 April 1998, as part of local government reorganisation in England and Wales. This county council was formed as part of the division of the previous county and district councils into two separate groupings, consisting of a unitary authority and a new county council with district councils. Within this structure, Newcounty was the new county council responsible for provision of education, caring services, police, traffic, road building and maintenance, libraries and strategic planning. The creation of Newcounty inevitably involved considerable change and uncertainty for those employed by the old county council. The change in the geographical area served and need for new organisational structures created uncertainty regarding continuation of employment, although there had been an undertaking that there would be no compulsory redundancies. An agreement had also been reached with the trades union concerned that the salaries of transferred employees would be protected for three years. In addition, Newcounty's senior management team sought to create a "can do" culture, with an intention to improve its levels of public service.

Prior to the creation of Newcounty, formal communication channels had been set up to keep employees informed of progress. A weekly newsletter was established along with an employee assistance programme to allow employees to seek answers to questions. The timetable against which posts in Newcounty's structure were to be filled was made public in October 1997 with a target date of all posts being filled by Christmas 1997. Posts were filled, starting with the top tier of management and working down. Unfortunately, the timetable was delayed, the last junior posts being advertised between mid-January and mid-February 1998. Consequently, the final posts were filled only a few days before Newcounty came into existence. Throughout this period, formal communication mechanisms such as the weekly newsletter and team briefings were used to keep employees informed about these delays and the reasons for them.

At Newcounty's request, this research commenced approximately one year after the county council had been created (May 1999). This meant that employees would have been able to reflect upon the

changes they had experienced and there would have been, in Newcounty's terms, "sufficient time for the new county council to settle down". Data collection incorporated two integrated methods that used structured and unstructured approaches: a card sort and in-depth interviews that built upon this first method to collect data. These data were obtained from a random sample of 28 employees stratified by both level within the organisation's hierarchy and across its five directorates, namely Corporate, Educational, Environmental, Financial and Social Services.

The card sort involved consideration of 21 negative and 19 positive possible emotions (**Table 1**) that might be experienced in relation to organisational change, derived from the psychology and stress literatures (Brockner, 1988, 1990; Brockner *et al.*, 1987, 1992a,b; Brockner and Greenberg, 1990; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Each employee was asked to "think about themselves in relation to the changes associated with the creation of [Newcounty]" and to sort the emotions into "do not feel" and "feel to some extent". Subsequently, each was asked to select those emotions which she or he "felt strongly", and from these to identify their "top three". This was followed by an unstructured interview, of approximately one hour's duration, which focused initially upon these top three emotions. The principal aims of each interview were to discover the employee's interpretation of each card selected and explore the reasons for that emotion in the context of the creation of Newcounty. As part of this process, interviewees were encouraged to describe and discuss their emotions in the context of their own perceptions of the changes. Notes from these interviews were subsequently transcribed and analysed using a process of categorisation to search for key themes and patterns (Dey, 1993). This methodology enabled employees' perceptions about facets of organisational justice to be described and explored from a grounded and subjective perspective (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997).

TABLE 1: RESPONDENTS SELECTING EACH EMOTION AS ONE OF THEIR "TOP THREE"

Negative emotions	Number of times selected with			Positive emotions	Number of times selected with		
	just negative emotions	positive emotions	total		just positive emotions	negative emotions	total
Frustrated	5	2	7	Positive	7	2	9
Under pressure	2	5	7	Determined	3	4	7
Powerless	2	4	6	Involved	2	5	7
Insecure	2	0	2	Enthusiastic	3	2	5
Stressed	2	0	2	Optimistic	3	1	4
Demoralised	1	1	2	Comfortable	3	0	3
Angry	1	0	1	Confident	3	0	3
Depressed	1	0	1	Keen	2	1	3
Overwhelmed	1	0	1	Hopeful	2	0	2
Worried	1	0	1	Relieved	2	0	2
Concerned	0	1	1	In control	1	1	2
On edge	0	1	1	Cheerful	1	0	1
Confused	0	0	0	Excited	1	0	1
Disinterested	0	0	0	Eager	0	1	1
Hopeless	0	0	0	Relaxed	0	1	1
Indifferent	0	0	0	Secure	0	1	1
Mistrustful	0	0	0	Calm	0	0	0
Panicky	0	0	0	Expectant	0	0	0
Resentful	0	0	0	Trusting	0	0	0
Resigned	0	0	0				
Vulnerable	0	0	0				
Total	**18**	**14**	**32**		**33**	**19**	**52**

Employees' Reactions

The card sort provided an overview of employees' reactions to the changes associated with the creation of Newcounty. Consideration of employees' "top three" emotions indicated that, overall, respondents were more likely to feel positive than negative towards the changes: 62% of these emotions represented positive feelings in relation to the changes (**Table 1**), the emotions of "positive", "determined" and "involved" being all selected by at least a quarter of all respondents. The remaining 38% of the emotions selected represented negative feelings, the emotions "frustrated" and "under pressure" both being selected by a quarter of all respondents.

Initial analysis of the reasons for choosing their "top three" emotions provided in the in-depth interviews suggested overlap in respondents' reasoning. However, there did appear to be some distinction between reasons for positive and for negative emotions. Examination of the top three emotions selected by each respondent suggested three groupings. The first of these contained the 11 respondents who chose only positive emotions in their "top three", who can be considered as feeling positive in relation to the changes. In particular, these respondents selected emotions such as "positive", "enthusiastic", "optimistic", "confident", "keen", "comfortable", "hopeful", "in control" and "relieved" (**Table 1**). These positive respondents had also selected predominantly positive emotions as those they "felt strongly" in the previous stage of the card sort process. They were drawn from all directorates and at a range of levels within the organisational hierarchy.

The second grouping consisted of the six respondents who selected only negative emotions such as "frustrated", "demoralised", "insecure" and "stressed" as the top three emotions they felt in relation to the changes (**Table 1**). These negative respondents had also selected predominantly negative emotions as those they "felt strongly" in the previous stage of the card sort process. Although predominantly from the Educational and Environmental Services directorates, these respondents again represented a range of levels within the organisational hierarchy.

The third grouping consisted of the remaining 11 respondents who selected two positive emotions such as "involved" and "determined" alongside a negative emotion, and negative emotions such as "under pressure" and "powerless" alongside a positive emotion (**Table 1**). Although this group might be construed as having mixed feelings in relation to the change, analysis of the interviews revealed two distinct

sub-groups. The first of these contained eight respondents who had selected predominantly positive emotions as their top three, and who had also selected predominantly positive emotions amongst those they "felt strongly". Although these employees represented all five directorates, the majority was in professional and managerial positions. This group discussed the "negative" emotions that they felt within the context of a generally positively-oriented set of perceptions about the organisational change that they had witnessed. Some rationalised their choice of such emotions in relation to their need to undergo adaptation and/or fears about the potential for perceived inequity related to the situation in which they now found themselves. For example, three of those selecting predominantly positive emotions justified their selection of the negative emotion "under pressure" on the grounds that each wished to "do my best" in their new posts. These respondents can therefore also be considered as feeling positive in relation to the change process despite their perceived need to adapt, possible personal feelings of insecurity and a need to prove their value in the changed context in which they now found themselves.

In contrast, the three respondents who selected one positive emotion alongside two negative emotions all held junior posts within the Educational or Environmental Services directorates. These employees had also selected predominantly negative emotions at the previous stage of the card sort. They justified their selection of a positive emotion, such as "optimistic" or "determined", through their ability or desire to do well "in spite of everything." Consequently, these respondents should be considered as feeling negative in relation to the changes.

It is to the reasons for these two groups of responses that we now turn. Using the theories of organisational justice outlined earlier, we compare and contrast the reasons offered by the 19 respondents who felt positive with the nine who felt negative in relation to the changes. Within this comparison, we commence by examining perceptions about distributive justice prior to looking at those about procedural and interactional justice.

Understanding Employees' Reactions – Perceptions of Justice

Distributive Justice

Justification of emotions related to the distributive aspects of the changes featured in two-thirds of respondents' discussions. This aspect of justice was discussed at two discrete levels: firstly, as the outcome for Newcounty within the wider context of local government reorganisation in England and Wales and, secondly, with regard to the outcome of the process for individual employees.

The majority of respondents reacting positively in relation to the changes stated that the creation of Newcounty was a fair outcome of the wider process of local government reorganisation. Two positive respondents, who had been employed in local government since the late 1960s, referred back to the 1974 reorganisation of local government in England and Wales and used this as an external referent standard to argue that the "re-creation" of Newcounty rectified the "mistake" made at that reorganisation. However, whilst believing that the overall outcome was fair there was awareness that other resource outcomes for Newcounty were not necessarily fair. This was typified by one positive professional employee who, when discussing Newcounty's new emphasis on serving the public, qualified it with the phrase "in spite of being strapped for cash". In this way, positive perceptions about working in an organisation with a greater emphasis on public service were mitigated, at least partially, by the belief that its resource allocation was unfair and that this would affect the public's perceptions about its role and effectiveness adversely. All those who felt positive also commented favourably about their personal outcomes, referring often to a relative feeling of involvement after the creation of Newcounty. Interviews with more senior employees emphasised that this was a deliberate outcome of the policy to create a "can do" culture at Newcounty. A minority of positive respondents also highlighted improvements in training and development opportunities in comparison with the old county council. Respondents reacting negatively in relation to the changes focused only on personal aspects of the outcomes. For these employees, discussions focused on the unfavourable nature of their outcomes compared to other employees, rather than an inherent unfairness. For two employees, both in technician posts, the receipt of statutory protection of jobs and salaries for three years was considered a fair but unfavourable outcome compared to colleagues. Similarly, a professional employee, who was not enjoying the post into which she

had been "fitted", commented that it was "not [Newcounty's] fault". Conversely, employees reacting positively in relation to the changes appeared to be evaluating their personal outcomes against their employment experiences with the previous county council rather than experiences of colleagues. This was particularly apparent in their discussion of the way they were involved in the work of the County Council and their perceptions of their employment benefits.

Procedural Justice

Similarities were also apparent between those employees who felt positive and the majority of those who felt negative, in relation to the changes with regard to perceptions of the fairness of procedures. All positive employees, and two-thirds of those who were negative, perceived the processes used in the creation of Newcounty, and in particular to determine allocations of individuals to posts, were fair. In contrast, the remaining third of those who felt negative, whilst they had begrudgingly accepted the outcomes, did not feel that the process upon which they were based was fair.

Employees at all levels in Newcounty had inevitably had some involvement in the process, if only because they had applied for and been appointed to posts within the county council. Those who felt positive in relation to the changes commented that the procedures used to recruit staff to Newcounty were drawn out, especially for those lower down the organisational hierarchy. In relation to this, a senior manager commented: "there were false promises – for example, the appointments process took longer." However, despite this, those who felt positive did not view the actual process as being unfair, rather that it had been compressed. One clerical worker illustrated this, when talking about her feeling of "relief", commenting: "The process towards the end was much too short. The majority were desperate to see jobs first on the email, get applications in and have the first interview. They felt that if you didn't get the details within the first half hour it was too late, yet provided you hit the deadline, it didn't matter."

The drawn-out nature of the recruitment process was also highlighted by those who felt negative in relation to the changes a typical comment being: "For all those months, progress could have been made. They must have known what was needed." Despite this, all but two of these respondents commented that the process itself was fair. These two employees, both from the same directorate, argued that the process was unfair due to what they saw as the

random nature of selection likening it to "tossing a coin" and "highlighting the influence of departmental politics."

Differences were apparent between positive and negative employees in the extent to which they felt they had been given voice in the process. In general, employees at all levels of the hierarchy who felt positive considered they had contributed the process of creating the new county council. Often, when justifying their selection of a positive emotion, they highlighted the opportunities they had had to express their views and emphasised that these views had been taken into account. However, this perception of effective voice was not supported by the examples given by employees in more junior posts. Rather, it appeared that although they were being given the opportunity to be involved, and voice opinions, their impact on the process was less clear. This was typified by one supervisor who commented: "We were even involved in the meeting about the corporate badge. This wouldn't have happened under the old [county council]."

This perceived use of voice in the change process contrasted markedly with employees who felt negative. These employees argued that the procedures had been reactive rather than proactive and that they were powerless throughout the change process. This was typified by one employee who commented that he could "only react to what happened and then make my own decision".

Interactional Justice

Interviews with all respondents suggest a separate and distinct aspect to their perceptions of procedural justice based upon the quality and quantity of interpersonal treatment they had received throughout the change process. Although respondents were not necessarily involved in managing the process of change themselves, their justifications for their choice of the top three emotions (both negative and positive) emphasised the importance of social aspects of their treatment and in particular of feeling supported and respected by senior managers. As suggested by the literature (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997), these social or interactional aspects of procedural justice raised by respondents fall into two distinct groupings: the adequacy of the information available and the extent to which people were treated with dignity and respect. In general, those who had selected positive or predominantly positive emotions felt these had been fair, whilst those who had selected negative or predominantly negative emotions felt the converse.

Comments by those who felt positive in relation to the changes emphasised the maintenance of communication throughout the change process, drawing comparisons with the relative inadequacy of communication in the old county council. The weekly newsletter was highlighted by over half of these respondents as an important source for gaining information, along with explanations for what was happening throughout the change process. This one-way communication was also typical of much face-to-face communication from senior managers, a typical comment from a positive middle manager recipient being "I like the way I was involved by members and officers in reorganisation – this was new. They explained their views and the way things were going. I like the way [Newcounty] has taken this forward to be a listening council."

In contrast, those who had felt negative in relation to the changes emphasised the inadequacy of the explanations they received. One manager commented "We felt there was a lack of information about the process, for example, we can't say for sure what's going to happen. I found it difficult to motivate my staff because of this indecision" whilst a technician felt there "… were just rumours and handouts [newsletters] for 10 months."

Respondents who felt positive about the change appeared to interpret their social interactions with senior management throughout the change process as inferring that they were valued and respected by the organisation. For example, a more junior manager stated "The important thing for me is that the Chair of the Committee was very up-front and supportive", whilst a supervisor partially justified her selection of positive emotions stating: "I feel valued. Management appears more caring – actions and words suggest this. They know staff names – before they would ignore staff …, they were incredibly rude. They value you as a person and have focused back on people being important". Interviews with positive respondents implied that the majority of these perceived their interaction with senior management to be two-way, despite their reported reality of a predominantly one-way interaction. This seems likely to be due to the quality of the interpersonal treatment received.

Those responding negatively in relation to the changes appeared more cynical about their treatment by senior managers and, as a consequence, less likely to believe that either the informational or social sensitivity aspects of their interactions were just. This cynicism is illustrated by two responses, both from managers. The first of these commenting upon the use of meetings by senior managers to provide

information implies that communication was not being undertaken for altruistic reasons: "Senior management tried to give an upbeat feeling but there was a clash of perceptions between them an the lower levels – we often heard "get real" being said by people and then the upbeat message lost impact". The second, by a more junior manager supports this: "Regular seminars were a good idea to put over the message but I hope it was a genuine informing rather than just 'isn't everything wonderful' – there's a lot of ego in it".

Disparities were also apparent between negative and positive respondents in their comments about the manner in which their line managers had treated them. Those responding positively in relation to the changes felt line managers had treated them justly with dignity and respect during their interactions. The majority stated their own line manager had been very positive and supportive, listening to their views. As with interpersonal treatment from senior managers, these positive respondents felt the motives for this were altruistic, the majority commenting upon the apparent "genuineness" of managers wanting to listen to and help their staff. This contrasted markedly with the experiences of those who responded negatively to the changes. These employees felt there was a lack of social sensitivity from their line managers, typical responses being: "She just said 'get on with it'" and "He didn't want to know". For these negative employees, disrespectful treatment was also perceived in the physical surroundings in which they found themselves working at the creation of Newcounty. A somewhat extreme example of this was given by one technician who commented "When I got to my new office, I found no phone, no desk or lockable drawers and yet everyone else was sorted out."

Comments also highlighted that interactions, although face-to-face, differed depending upon the hierarchical distance between employees. Interactions between junior and more senior managers relating to the work of the county council were predominantly one-way, often consisting of presentations to large groups, or the offering of greetings. In contrast, interactions with the immediate manager were more likely to be two-way. For those who felt positive in relation to the changes, both of these types of interaction appeared to have been interpreted as two-way. However, for those who felt negative towards the changes, interactions with line managers were felt to have lacked either sensitivity or respect for the more junior employees and were considered unjust. These employees were also likely to be

cynical about the nature and intent of interactions with senior management.

Discussion

Analysis of employees' responses reveals that, overall, both those who felt positive and those who felt negative about the changes considered the outcome to be fair. However, for those who felt positive in relation to the changes, discussions about distributive justice were concerned with both the outcomes for the organisation as well as for themselves, whereas for those who felt negative about the changes, discussion focused upon the fairness of their personal outcome. This finding in relation to those who felt positive implies a conceptualisation of distributive justice at more than just an individual level. Whereas the literature recognises the link between organisational decisions and perceptions of fairness related to individual allocations and outcomes, our findings point to perceptions that were not only focused on individual allocations but also outcomes in relation to the broader organisation. This may be taken to suggest that those who felt positive were concerned not only about allocations for themselves but also outcomes for the organisation, since they felt a higher level of commitment to it. Respondents were also able to report that, whilst they perceived the creation of the organisation as a fair outcome, they felt that the resources allocated to it were unfair. This further emphasises the way in which respondents differentiated between levels of outcome, seeing some as fair and other as unfair.

Although the reality of procedural involvement in Newcounty suggests that only those in more senior positions exercised process control, many more respondents expressed the feeling that they had been offered the scope to be involved as part of these changes. This feeling led to a general perception of procedural fairness from virtually all employees interviewed. Whilst the relationship between the scope for involvement and the resulting perception of procedural fairness fulfils the prediction suggested by extant literature, this raises an issue about why so many respondents felt that they had been able to influence the process when the reality they described suggested otherwise.

Consideration of interactional justice highlighted considerable differences between respondents who felt negative and respondents who felt positive about the changes. When interactions with senior management are considered, those who felt positive about the changes were more likely to perceive it as two-way whereas those

who felt negative were less likely to do so. In discussion, those who felt positive about the changes were more likely to feel they had been listened to and treated with dignity and respect. In contrast, those who felt negative were likely to be cynical about their treatment. The interaction between line managers and those they managed appeared to be important in relation to the generation of perceptions of fairness about treatment, suggesting a clear linkage between the justification and sensitivity. This observation is supported by the fact that the majority of those respondents who felt negative with regard to the changes were located in two directorates, implying that people in these directorates may have received different interpersonal treatment.

It therefore appears that factors influencing perceptions of interactional justice were the key differentiators between employees' feelings in relation to the changes and, in particular, the processes of communication. This would imply that interactional justice issues are considered separately by employees and therefore need to be considered separately rather than, as has been more common in recent years, as an aspect of procedural justice, when managing the change process. In particular, the results highlight the importance of what can be termed as a reciprocated communication between line managers and employees rather than voice in engendering positive reactions.

These findings have, we believe significant implications for organisations, emphasising the pivotal role of line managers in promoting justice and associated positive responses in relation to changes. In particular, the findings emphasise the importance of good two-way communication and the demonstration of caring extending down to the attitudes and role of socially-sensitive and skilled line managers. However, it should be remember that these findings are based on employees from one public sector organisation responding to externally-forced changes. Further research is required to establish if these outcomes are replicated in different sectors and in relation to different change situations.

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