Getting even with one’s supervisor and one’s organization: relationships among types of injustice, desires for revenge, and counterproductive work behaviors

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Summary
I tested hypotheses derived from the agent–system model of justice specifying that, among the different types of justice, interpersonal and informational justice explain the most unique variance in counterproductive work behavior (CWB) directed toward one’s supervisor, and procedural justice explains the most unique variance in CWB directed toward one’s organization. I also tested whether individuals’ desires for revenge against one’s supervisor and one’s organization mediate certain justice–CWB relationships. Results (N = 424) provided considerable support for the study hypotheses, showing that employees tend to direct their CWB toward the source of perceived mistreatment, and that desires for revenge explain part, but not all, of the relationships between some types of injustice and CWB. Implications for theory, research, and practice are discussed. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

It has been estimated that up to 75 per cent of employees engage in behaviors such as theft, sabotage, unexcused absenteeism, and vandalism (Harper, 1990; McGurn, 1988), and such behavior is costly. Employee theft, for example, costs the US retail industry $15 billion annually (Hollinger & Davis, 2001). Other more subtle kinds of “misbehavior” are also likely to have economic and psychological costs to both organizations and their members. For instance, job performance and cooperation among coworkers likely suffer when employees purposely waste time or ignore their supervisors’ instructions.

The term counterproductive work behavior (CWB) describes behaviors by organizational members that are counter to the organization’s legitimate interests (Sackett, 2002). Consistent support has been found for the relationships between perceived unfairness and CWB (Bennett & Robinson, 2003). Little is known, however, about whether different types of justice are more or less predictive of various types of CWB. Thus, I tested the relative effects of justice types on CWB that most directly affects one’s supervisor (CWB-S) and one’s organization (CWB-O). The agent–system model of justice suggests that perceptions of fairness about one’s manager or supervisor may explain the most unique variance in
CWB-S and perceptions of fairness about an organization’s procedures may explain the most unique variance in CWB-O (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000). This possibility has not yet been tested on CWB because different types of justice, CWB-S, and CWB-O have not been measured within the same study.

A second purpose of this study was to test a common, albeit rarely tested, explanation for the relationship between perceived injustice and CWB: individuals who feel unfairly treated seek revenge, which is often manifested in CWB (Bies & Tripp, 1996). Although several researchers infer the presence of desires for revenge from relationships between perceived injustice and CWB (e.g., Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), whether desires for revenge mediate these relationships has not been tested using quantitative data. If, for example, the effect of a particular type of injustice on CWB is independent from revenge desires, other mechanisms need to be tested.

Organizational Justice and Counterproductive Work Behavior

Various constructs related to CWB encompass overlapping behavioral domains, such as anti-social behavior (Aquino & Douglas, 2003), organizational retaliatory behavior (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), and workplace deviance (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Despite conceptual differences among these constructs, they are measured in largely the same way (Spector & Fox, 2005). Accordingly, the label CWB is used throughout this paper when discussing studies in which similar behavioral domains were examined.

A number of studies show that individuals who perceive greater unfairness tend to engage in more CWB (e.g., Aquino, Galperin, & Bennett, 2004). Researchers have studied perceptions of fairness in organizations pertaining to the outcomes individuals’ receive (i.e., distributive justice; Adams, 1965), procedures used to determine outcomes (i.e., procedural justice; Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980), and interpersonal treatment from decision makers and other authorities (i.e., interactional justice; Bies & Moag, 1986). The latter, interactional justice, comprises two distinct components (Colquitt, 2001). Interpersonal justice refers to perceptions about the extent to which authorities treat people with sensitivity, dignity, and respect. Informational justice refers to the perceived adequacy of explanations authorities provide about procedures and outcomes that affect people.

Perceived injustice of any type may relate to CWB because employees who feel unfairly treated may reduce their cooperative behaviors to avoid exploitation (Lind, 2001), and because of other reasons described later. To advance this literature, however, researchers have called for the study of whether various types of injustice differentially predict certain forms of CWB (Bennett & Robinson, 2003). Much like what has been argued in the context of employee aggression (Greenberg & Barling, 1999), considering the target of employees’ CWB may ultimately help understand, predict, and control such behavior. Researchers advocate measuring specific targets of CWB, such as the organization or one’s supervisor, rather than measuring CWB with reference to multiple targets like any individuals in the organization, given that the pattern of relationships between various predictors and CWB depend on the target of the behavior (Hershcovis et al., 2007). Thus, I tested the unique effects of different types of justice on CWB directed toward supervisors and toward organizations.

The agent–system model of justice

Based on social exchange principles (e.g., Blau, 1964), the agent–system model of justice suggests that individuals tend to direct their responses toward the perceived source of fair or unfair treatment (Bies &
Moag, 1986; Masterson et al., 2000). Because individuals who believe they benefit from another party’s discretionary actions tend to feel obligated to reciprocate (Gouldner, 1960), employees who believe they are treated fairly by their supervisors, for example, might reciprocate through cooperative behaviors that benefit their supervisors. Alternatively, individuals who believe they are treated unfairly may reciprocate through some type of negative response, such as CWB (Eisenberger, Lynch, Aselage, & Rohdieck, 2004; Gouldner, 1960). Given that employees form social exchange relationships with both their supervisors and their employing organizations (Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002), employees may respond to perceived unfairness by engaging in CWB-S or CWB-O, depending upon whether a supervisor or the organization is perceived as the source of injustice. These predictions are consistent with Lavelle, Rupp, and Brockner (2007) who proposed that employees tend to react to perceived justice through attitudes and behaviors directed toward the source of the treatment, which they labeled the “target similarity effect.” Notably, although Lavelle et al. focused on understanding relationships between justice and citizenship behavior, they suggested their model may provide a useful framework for understanding CWB.

Although a given type of justice can be influenced by multiple sources (for a review, see Lavelle et al., 2007), the agent–system model assumes that the source of interactional justice is most often a supervisor or manager (the agent) and the source of procedural justice is most often the organization (the system; Bies & Moag, 1986). Thus, employees will tend to respond to interactional injustice through CWB-S and to procedural injustice through CWB-O. This model is supported by studies showing that interactional justice accounts for the most unique variance in organizational citizenship behavior that benefits supervisors, and procedural justice accounts for the most unique variance in citizenship behavior that predominantly benefits the organization (Fassina, Jones, & Uggerslev, 2008; Masterson et al., 2000). The agent–system model is also consistent with theory on CWB suggesting that disgruntled individuals tend to direct their CWB toward entities they deem responsible for mistreatment, whether that be an individual or the organization (O’Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996; Robinson & Bennett, 1995).

Researchers have utilized a distinction between two types of CWB to study the effects of justice on CWB directed toward the organization and/or toward any organizational member including both coworkers and supervisors (Aquino et al., 2004; Aquino, Lewis, & Bradfield, 1999; Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; Kickul, Neuman, Parker, & Finkl, 2001; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Skarlicki, Folger, & Tesluk, 1999), but these researchers did not examine CWB directed solely toward supervisors (CWB-S). In a few studies, researchers examined relationships between justice and CWB-S, but did not measure CWB-O or multiple types of justice (e.g., Dupre, Inness, Connelly, Barling, & Hption, 2006; Greenberg & Barling, 1999; Inness, Barling, & Turner, 2005). Although these studies contribute greatly to the justice–CWB literature, the agent–system model remains untested because different types of justice, CWB-S, and CWB-O have not been measured in the same study.

**Hypotheses about justice and counterproductive behavior**

Hypotheses about the unique effects of different justice types on CWB-S and CWB-O were derived from the agent–system model. As discussed later, desires for revenge are thought to underlie justice–CWB relationships, and theory suggests that revenge tends to be targeted toward the source of perceived mistreatment (e.g., Bies, Tripp, & Kramer, 1997), much like what is suggested by the agent–system model. Moreover, the agent–system model is consistent with social exchange-based explanations of justice–behavior relationships (Lavelle et al., 2007) and is supported by meta-analytic findings on other work behaviors (Fassina et al., 2008).
Hypothesis 1: Interpersonal and informational justice will explain more unique variance in CWB directed toward one’s supervisor (CWB-S) than will procedural and distributive justice.

Hypothesis 2: Procedural justice will explain more unique variance in CWB directed toward one’s organization (CWB-O) than will interpersonal, informational, and distributive justice.

The Mediating Role of Revenge Desires in Justice–CWB Relationships

Relationships between perceived injustice and CWB are believed to reflect underlying desires for revenge (e.g., Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). Revenge is defined as an individual’s attempt to harm a person or party blamed for an offense (Stuckless & Goranson, 1992). Avengers often describe the workplace events that motivated their revenge in ways that are highly consistent with the content domains of the different types of injustice (Jones, in press), frequently using words like ‘unfair’ or ‘unjust’ in their descriptions (Bies & Tripp, 1996). Avengers also state that they fulfill their desires to harm the party they hold responsible for an offense by engaging in CWB (Bies & Tripp, 1996; Jones, in press). Experimental research shows that some individuals even sacrifice financial gain for the opportunity to punish an unfair person (Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress, & Gee, 2002).

Based on theory and findings like those just reviewed, researchers often infer that desires for revenge underlie the relationships between unfairness and CWB, sometimes labeling measures of CWB as “retaliatory behavior” without presenting empirical evidence for the presence of underlying revenge desires (e.g., Blader, Chang, & Tyler, 2001; Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Skarlicki et al., 1999; for a discussion of ways in which researchers have demonstrated evidence for underlying revenge motives, see Jones, in press). To date, the mediating role of revenge in justice–CWB relationships has not been tested using quantitative data. To date, the mediating role of revenge in justice–CWB relationships has not been tested using quantitative data.1 Two recent studies, however, provide quantitative evidence linking injustice to revenge-motivated behavior. Aquino, Tripp, and Bies (2006) measured revenge-motivated behavior without reference to specific actions (e.g., “I tried to hurt them”) and found that employees with lower status engaged in more revenge when the climate for procedural justice was low. Barclay, Skarlicki, and Pugh (2005) measured procedural justice, interactional justice, and outcome favorability pertaining to layoffs, and coded written accounts from victims about whether they did anything to “get even.” Results showed that outcome favorability and interactional justice interacted to predict revenge-motivated behavior.

Revenge in response to procedural and interpersonal injustice

Theory on workplace revenge has emphasized morality-based and identity-based mechanisms, and both suggest that procedural and interactional injustice may be stronger triggers of revenge desires relative to distributive and informational injustice. Considering morality-based mechanisms,

1Marketing researchers, however, have examined customers’ desires for revenge after service failures using quantitative data. Gregoire and Fisher (2006) found that desires to retaliate were strongest when customers had poorer quality relationships with the firm and they inferred that the firm had some control over the service failure. The desire for retaliation predicted negative word-of-mouth, complaining to third parties, and reduction in patronage. Results also showed that the perceived unfairness of the service failure, which was used as a control variable, was positively related to the desire for retaliation.
individuals often seek revenge because they consider it a moral imperative—revenge serves justice by “righting a wrong” (Bies & Tripp, 1996). Among the types of justice, interpersonal injustice may most strongly trigger desires for revenge through morality-based mechanisms because it represents a violation of norms about ethical conduct (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Individuals are believed to seek revenge for violations of the “social covenant”—the shared belief that people deserve to be treated with respect and dignity—which represent the “ultimate universal affront” (Folger & Skarlicki, 1998, p. 69). Procedural injustice, too, might trigger revenge desires through morality-based mechanisms. Violations of the so-called “Leventhal rules” of procedural justice (Leventhal et al., 1980) are likely associated with considerable “moral weight,” such as when procedures are perceived as unethical or biased toward certain people. In contrast, informational and distributive injustice may not carry similar levels of moral repugnancy when, for example, managers fail to give adequate explanations or employees discover that they receive the same amount of pay as some of their underperforming coworkers.

Identity-based mechanisms also explain why perceived unfairness can trigger desires for revenge. People care about justice because it provides signals about the extent to which they are respected by organizational authorities, and it provides information about their standing within groups (Tyler & Lind, 1992). Events that threaten self-esteem and group standing can trigger revenge desires because people are motivated to defend against threats to their personal and social identities (Aquino & Douglas, 2003). Seeking revenge may help “victims” save face (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000) and restore their self-esteem and group standing (Bies & Tripp, 1996). Indeed, some employees claim to have sought revenge after events that caused embarrassment or damage to their reputations (Jones, in press).

Some types of injustice may be particularly likely to prompt desires for revenge via identity-based mechanisms. Interpersonal injustice can signal that the transgressors do not respect or value the victims’ contributions to the group (Tyler & Lind, 1992). Unfair procedures can communicate that the organization cares little about the interests of its employees and may be indicative of their lower group standing (Tyler & Lind, 1992). For reasons like these, Tyler and Blader (2003) assert that the quality of decision making processes (i.e., procedural justice) and interpersonal treatment from authorities carry more identity-relevant information than does distributive justice. Concerning informational justice, Tyler and Blader’s (2003) conceptualization of interpersonal treatment parallels interpersonal justice with little to no reference to informational justice. Thus, identity-based mechanisms suggest that interpersonal and procedural injustice are particularly strong triggers of desires for revenge.

**Hypotheses about revenge**

Given that revenge represents an individual’s attempt to harm the perceived source of mistreatment (Stuckless & Goranson, 1992), employees likely tend to engage in CWB that most directly affects the target of their revenge desires, which by definition is the party held responsible for perceived mistreatment. This notion is consistent with theory suggesting that revenge-motivated behavior tends to be highly targeted (Bies et al., 1997) and with the agent–system model of justice which specifies targeted responses to perceived (in)justice. Thus, the relationship between interpersonal injustice and CWB-S is likely mediated by desires for revenge against one’s supervisor, and the relationship between procedural injustice and CWB-O is likely mediated by desires for revenge against one’s organization.

In the hypotheses below partial, rather than full, mediation was predicted because perceived injustice may relate to CWB through multiple mechanisms. For example, employees who feel unfairly treated may reduce their cooperative behaviors to avoid exploitation (Lind, 2001), may engage in aggressive behaviors in response to frustration stemming from perceived injustice (Fox & Spector, 1999), and may
engage in CWB due to thrill seeking or other proclivities for deviance for which injustice provides individuals a convenient justification (Jones, in press).

*Hypothesis 3*: The effect of interpersonal justice on CWB-S is partially mediated by the desire for revenge against one’s supervisor.

*Hypothesis 4*: The effect of procedural justice on CWB-O is partially mediated by the desire for revenge against one’s organization.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 424 employed students who received a 2 per cent credit toward a course grade at a Canadian university. Most participants were in their early to mid-twenties ($M = 22.94, SD = 5.06$ years) and 79.5 per cent were female. On average, participants had held about five jobs ($M = 4.79, SD = 2.58$), totaling 6.51 years of work experience ($SD = 4.49$). The mean tenure in their present jobs was 2.32 years ($SD = 2.24$) and they worked an average of 20.04 hours each week ($SD = 9.95$). Like in other CWB research (e.g., Kickul et al., 2001; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007), participants were sampled from various organizations and industries, which likely bolsters generalizability (Bennett & Robinson, 2003): service (38 per cent), sales (29 per cent), government (8 per cent), professional (8 per cent), and other (25 per cent).

### Procedure

Perceived anonymity is vital when measuring CWB through self-report (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). To this end, the researcher told participants not to name their employer and that it was impossible to associate their responses with their names. Participants completed a questionnaire about “attitudes and behaviors at work” in a quiet room. Completion of the predictor and criterion measures was separated by about 30 minutes during which time participants completed measures unrelated to this study.

### Measures

#### Control variables

Younger males tend to commit more acts of deviance (Hollinger & Clark, 1983). Thus, self-reported gender and age were used as control variables. The number of hours worked each week was not controlled for because it did not correlate with any predictors or criteria (for all regression results reported herein, the pattern of significant and non-significant effects was identical when weekly hours was and was not included as a control variable).

#### Organizational justice

Responses to Colquitt’s (2001) measures of the four types of justice were made on a scale from 1 (To a Small Extent) to 7 (To a Large Extent). The justice measures were designed to reflect the agent–system
model’s premise that the source of interactional justice is often one’s supervisor or manager, and the source of procedural justice is often one’s organization (Masterson et al., 2000). Items for interpersonal and informational justice referred to an “immediate supervisor.” Because pay is a salient outcome determined through organizational-level procedures in most organizations, items for distributive and procedural justice focused on pay (including base and bonus pay).

**Desire for revenge**

Items used to measure revenge desires were constructed for this study. Revenge desires were assessed on a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) using four items, which were duplicated to refer either to one’s “immediate supervisor” or the “company.” Two items were intended to assess retaliatory intentions (“I intend to settle the score with...” and “I plan on getting even with...in the near future”). Two other items were intended to assess the expected utility of revenge, which refers to the degree an individual believes that the benefits of revenge are worth the potential costs (“If I were mistreated by...the satisfaction of getting even would outweigh the risks of getting caught” and “If I were mistreated by...it would feel good to get back in some way”).

**Counterproductive work behavior**

Like in most CWB research (e.g., Aquino et al., 1999; Fox et al., 2001), CWB was measured through self-report because the behavior is often performed in private. Self-report often provides a more accurate and valid assessment of CWB than other methods (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Fox & Spector, 1999). For all CWB items, participants were asked, “How often have you...,” and response options ranged from 1 (Never) to 7 (Daily). Because the CWB items needed to be applicable to a wide range of contexts and measured with reference to one’s organization or one’s supervisor (rather than to any individual in the organization), most CWB items were taken from previous studies.

The CWB-O measure comprised five items from the Organizational Deviance Scale (Bennett & Robinson, 2000) and three items from Skarlicki and Folger (1997). The items were: “Taken an additional or longer break than is acceptable at your workplace,” “Tried to look busy while wasting time,” “Put little effort into your work,” “Wasted company materials,” “Intentionally worked slower than you could have worked,” “Spent too much time fantasizing or daydreaming instead of working,” “Spent time on personal matters while at work,” and “Taken property from work without permission.”

The CWB-S measure comprised five items that all referred to an “immediate supervisor.” The items “Purposely neglected to follow your immediate supervisor’s instructions” and “Acted rudely toward your immediate supervisor” were adapted from the Organizational and Interpersonal Deviance Scales, respectively (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). The item “Spread unconfirmed rumors about your immediate supervisor” was from Skarlicki and Folger (1997). Other items were constructed for this study: “Done something to get your immediate supervisor in trouble” and “Encouraged your coworkers to get back at your immediate supervisor.”

**Results**

**Measurement model**

Confirmatory factor analyses with maximum likelihood estimation were used to examine the distinctness of all study measures. The measurement model comprised four types of justice, desires for revenge against one’s organization and one’s supervisor, CWB-O, and CWB-S. The fit of this model to

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the data was reasonable to good. Although the \( \chi^2 \) to df ratio (\( \chi^2/df \)) value of 2.40 was higher than the arbitrary ratio of 2 or less considered to indicate good fit (Arbuckle, 1997), the incremental fit index (IFI) and comparative fit index (CFI) were both .90, indicating good fit (Bentler, 1990), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value of .058 was between the range of .05 and .08, indicating reasonable fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). The extent of same-source variance was assessed using a Harmon’s single-factor test. The fit of a single factor model to the data was poor: \( \chi^2/df = 9.28, \) IFI = .40, CFI = .40, RMSEA = .140. Thus, same-source variance was not pervasive in these data.

Discriminant validity was assessed for the distinction between CWB-O and CWB-S by comparing the eight-factor measurement model to a seven-factor model in which all CWB items comprised a single factor. Although the fit of the single CWB-factor model to the data was reasonable (\( \chi^2/df = 3.55, \) IFI = .82, CFI = .82, RMSEA = .078), a comparison of the two models using a sequential chi-square difference test showed that the intended measurement model provided a significantly better fit to the data (\( p < .001 \)). To assess discriminant validity for desires for revenge against one’s supervisor versus one’s organization, the measurement model was compared to a model that included a single revenge desires factor. The fit of the model with a single revenge desires factor was reasonable (\( \chi^2/df = 2.95, \) IFI = .86, CFI = .86, RMSEA = .068), but was significantly worse than the measurement model (\( p < .001 \)).

**Descriptive statistics and correlations**

Means, standard deviations, internal consistency estimates, and correlations for all study variables are shown in Table 1. All internal consistency estimates exceeded the minimum value recommended for use in research (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). With one exception, tests of significant differences between correlations among the four types of justice with the two types of CWB were consistent with the agent–system model (using an \( \alpha \) of .05; the exception was that CWB-O did not correlate more strongly with procedural justice than with informational justice).

**Hypothesis testing**

As seen in Tables 2 and 3, respectively, the desires for revenge against one’s supervisor and against one’s organization were each regressed on the two control variables (age and gender) and on the four

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>22.94</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Gender</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>-.01</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Interpersonal</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Informational</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td>.36***</td>
<td>(.75)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Procedural</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Distributive</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.22***</td>
<td>.26***</td>
<td>.49***</td>
<td>(.91)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Desire for revenge-S</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>-.12*</td>
<td>.19***</td>
<td>-.36***</td>
<td>-.28***</td>
<td>-.23***</td>
<td>-.17***</td>
<td>(.78)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. CWB-S</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.14***</td>
<td>-.45***</td>
<td>-.37***</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
<td>.53***</td>
<td>(.76)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Desire for revenge-O</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>-.13**</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>-.23***</td>
<td>-.18***</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>.70**</td>
<td>.37***</td>
<td>(.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. CWB-O</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>-.13**</td>
<td>.22***</td>
<td>-.13**</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* \( N = 424 \). Gender was coded as 0 for females and 1 for males. “CWB” refers to counterproductive work behavior. “S” and “O” refer to supervisor and organizationally referenced variables, respectively. Cronbach’s alphas are presented in the off-diagonals in parentheses, and the \( \alpha \) for CWB-O was .84.

\( ^*p < .05; ^{**}p < .01; ^{***}p < .001. \)
types of justice. Also seen in Tables 2 and 3 are the results from the regressions in which each CWB measure was regressed on the control variables and the four types of justice (entered in Step 1), and on desires for revenge against one’s supervisor and against one’s organization (entered in Step 2).

Consistent with the discriminant validity evidence from the CFAs, Table 2 shows that the desire for revenge against one’s supervisor was a significant predictor of CWB-S, whereas the desire for revenge against one’s organization was not. Similarly, Table 3 shows that the desire for revenge against one’s organization, but not against one’s supervisor, predicted CWB-O.

Hypothesis 1 specified that, among the types of justice, interpersonal and informational justice are the strongest predictors of unique variance in CWB-S. The two control variables and the four types of justice together explained 24 per cent of the variance in CWB-S (see Step 1 in Table 2), of which 21 per cent was attributable to shared and unique variance among the four types of justice. Concerning the unique effects of justice, in Step 1, interpersonal and informational justice were the only significant predictors of CWB-S. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 was that procedural justice explains the most unique variance in CWB-O. The two control variables and the four types of justice explained 12 per cent of the variance in CWB-O (see Step 1 in Table 3), of which 6 per cent was attributable to shared and unique variance among the four types of justice.

Table 2. Regression results: effects of justice on the desire for revenge against one’s supervisor and counterproductive work behavior directed toward one’s supervisor (CWB-S)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>sr²</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revenge desire-S</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.02*</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>16.15***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.49***</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal justice</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational justice</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural justice</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td></td>
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Note: N = 424. Gender was coded as 0 for females and 1 for males. “Revenge desire-S” and “Revenge desire-O” refer to desires for revenge against one’s supervisor and organization, respectively. sr² is the squared semi-partial correlation, or unique variance explained.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
justice. Supporting Hypothesis 2, results from Step 1 show that procedural justice was the only significant predictor of unique variance in CWB-O among the types of justice.

Hypothesis 3 specified that the effect of interpersonal justice on CWB-S is partially mediated by the desire for revenge against one’s supervisor. Evidence for mediation was assessed using the Baron and Kenny (1986) approach and Sobel tests. Table 2 shows that, among the types of justice, only interpersonal justice had a significant effect on the desire for revenge against one’s supervisor. On CWB-S, interpersonal justice explained unique variance in Step 1 and this effect became weaker but was still significant in Step 2 when tested incremental to the desires for revenge. In Step 2, the desire for revenge against one’s supervisor had a significant effect on CWB-S. A Sobel test showed that this indirect effect was significant ($Z = 3.76, p < .001$). These findings support Hypothesis 3 and suggest that the negative effect of interpersonal justice on CWB-S was partially mediated by the desire for revenge against one’s supervisor.

Hypothesis 4 was that the effect of procedural justice on CWB-O is partially mediated by the desire for revenge against one’s organization. Table 3 shows that both interpersonal and procedural justice were significant predictors of desires for revenge against one’s organization. On CWB-O, only procedural justice was a significant predictor in Step 1, and this effect was still significant but became weaker in Step 2. In Step 2, desires for revenge against one’s organization had a significant effect on

Note: $N = 424$. Gender was coded as 0 for females and 1 for males. “Revenge desire-S” and “Revenge desire-O” refer to desires for revenge against one’s supervisor and organization, respectively. $sr^2$ is the squared semi-partial correlation, or unique variance explained.

$p < .05$; $** p < .01$; $*** p < .001$. 

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CWB-O. A Sobel test showed that this indirect effect was significant ($Z = -1.94$, $p = .05$). These results support Hypothesis 4 and suggest that the negative effect of procedural justice on CWB-O was partially mediated by the desire for revenge against one’s organization.

**Discussion**

The purposes of this study were to test theory specifying how various types of injustice relate differentially to CWB-O and CWB-S, and whether desires for revenge underlie some of these relationships. Results provided support for all study hypotheses, suggesting that the agent–system model provides a good account of justice–CWB relationships and that desires for revenge explain some, but not all, of the effects of some types of justice on CWB-S and CWB-O.

**Relationship among types of injustice and counterproductive work behavior**

Scholars have called for research on whether various types of injustice differentially predict certain forms of CWB (Bennett & Robinson, 2003) and on the differences between predicting CWB directed toward organizations versus supervisors (Hershcovis et al., 2007). Supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2 derived from the agent–system model (Masterson et al., 2000), results showed that interpersonal and informational justice accounted for the most unique variance in CWB-S and procedural justice accounted for the most unique variance in CWB-O. These results are consistent with recent theory (Lavelle et al., 2007) and meta-analytic findings about the effects of justice on different types of organizational citizenship behavior (Fassina et al., 2008). One strength of the tests of Hypotheses 1 and 2 is that, unlike some studies in which the relative strengths of justice effects were compared (Masterson et al., 2000; Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002), different types of justice were tested while controlling for distributive justice. Researchers assert that distributive justice should be included when testing exchange perspectives on justice, especially when comparative inferences are drawn (Ambrose & Arnaud, 2005).

Researchers should build upon these findings by distinguishing between the types and sources of justice when predicting different forms of CWB. In this study, the measures of justice were designed to focus on the predominant source of each justice type as assumed by the agent–system model (i.e., measures of interpersonal and informational justice focused on treatment from one’s “immediate supervisor” and the measure of procedural justice focused on company procedures for determining pay). Nonetheless, research demonstrates the usefulness of crossing types of justice with different sources (e.g., procedural justice emanating from one’s supervisor; Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002). The social exchange principles upon which the agent–system model is based (e.g., Blau, 1964) suggest that people direct their responses toward the perceived source of justice, regardless of the type of justice. Future research should examine whether, for example, procedural and interactional justice emanating from a supervisor predict CWB-S more strongly than do procedural justice and interactional justice emanating from the organization.

Echoing Hershcovis et al. (2007), this study highlights the value in measuring CWB directed toward specific targets, such as one’s supervisor, rather than toward organizational members in general, which is particularly important when testing theory about the relative effects of perceived injustice. In this study, all CWB-S items referred to an “immediate supervisor.” However, like other measures of CWB directed toward the organization (e.g., organizational deviance, Bennett & Robinson, 2000) the CWB-O
items did not refer explicitly to the organization. Instead, the CWB-O measure comprised items that are assumed by researchers to most directly affect the organization, rather than specific individuals within the organization. To advance theory the targets of CWB should be made explicit in the item content.

The mediating role of revenge in relationships between injustice and CWB

Is revenge more strongly associated with certain types of injustice?
Although researchers often infer that the desire for revenge underlies the relationships between perceived injustice and CWB (e.g., Blader et al., 2001), this study is the first to test whether desires for revenge mediate the relationships between justice and CWB using quantitative data. I asserted that morality-based (Bies & Tripp, 1996; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998) and identity-based (Aquino & Douglas, 2003; Tyler & Blader, 2003) mechanisms suggest that desires for revenge are most strongly triggered by interpersonal and procedural injustice, relative to informational and distributive injustice. Supporting Hypotheses 3 and 4, results provided evidence that the relationship between interpersonal justice and CWB-S was partially mediated by the desire for revenge against one’s supervisor, and the relationship between procedural justice and CWB-O was partially mediated by the desire for revenge against one’s organization. Researchers should directly test the extent to which morality- and identity-based motives, as well as other potential motives (e.g., power restoration motives; Cropanzano & Baron, 1991), are triggered to varying degrees by different types of injustice.

A targeted perspective of workplace revenge
Mediation was tested by including the desires for revenge against both one’s supervisor and one’s organization in the regression analyses, which is important for at least two reasons. First, given the correlation between the two measures of revenge desires (r = .70), individual differences in the propensity to seek revenge (Eisenberger et al., 2004) may have unduly confounded the results if either target of revenge desires was tested in isolation. By including measures pertaining to both targets of revenge desires, much of their shared variance due to unmeasured individual differences was presumably controlled for in the tests of their unique effects, thereby allowing for “cleaner” tests of the mediating role of desires for revenge against specific targets. Also possible is that the two measures of revenge desires correlated this strongly because employees perceive their supervisors as representatives of the larger organization. As such, including both measures of revenge desires in the tests of mediation may have biased hypothesis testing toward finding support for targeted revenge effects because shared variance associated with the “cognitive mixing” of these two entities would have been excluded from the tests of their unique effects. Notably, however, when mediated effects were tested using only a single target of revenge desires in the analyses, the conclusions drawn from hypothesis testing were unchanged.

A second strength of the analytic approach used for testing mediation was that it allowed the data to “speak for itself,” meaning that all possible combinations of mediated justice effects on CWB-S and CWB-O through the two targets of revenge desires were examined. As such, it is illuminating that the only mediated effects for which evidence was found conformed to a targeted response perspective of revenge: employees responded to two types of injustice by seeking revenge against the perceived source of mistreatment, which was manifested in CWB that most directly affected that same source. These results are consistent with theory suggesting that revenge-motivated behavior tends to be highly targeted (Bies et al., 1997), and with the targeted responses specified by the agent–system model (Masterson et al., 2000).

Revenge desires were operationalized through items reflecting retaliatory intentions and the expected utility of revenge. As such, the results of this study are consistent with theory suggesting that
workplace revenge is often an intentional response to perceived mistreatment that is “cool and calculated” (Bies & Tripp, 2001). Other studies suggest that before engaging in revenge-motivated behavior some employees make plans to “get even,” consider different options for revenge, and think about the consequences of those options (Jones & Carroll, 2007). Researchers should seek to understand the implications of mental planning and other calculated thought processes involved in revenge. For instance, are greater levels of mental calculation about revenge associated with individuals’ propensities to act on their desires or with the severity of their revenge-motivated behavior?

Beyond revenge: other mechanisms underlying justice–CWB relationships

Regression results showed that informational and distributive justice were unrelated to desires for revenge against one’s supervisor or one’s organization. Moreover, the evidence for partially mediated effects suggests that interpersonal and procedural justice may have other effects on CWB through unmeasured mechanisms. Thus, it may be inaccurate to label measures of CWB as revenge or retaliation based solely on observed covariance with perceived justice, as some researchers have done (e.g., Blader et al., 2001; Shaw et al., 2003; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). Theory and research on the relationships between justice and CWB can be advanced by testing other explanatory motives and mechanisms. Relationships between justice and CWB may reflect motives to avoid exploitation by reducing cooperative behavior (Lind, 2001) or aggression due to frustration stemming from perceived injustice (Fox & Spector, 1999). Employees who are higher on thrill seeking or other proclivities for deviance may use perceived injustice as a justification for engaging CWB (Jones, in press). Also possible is that employees engage in withdrawal behaviors subsumed within CWB (e.g., illegitimate absences) in an effort to avoid unfair supervisors or work environments.

All four types of justice were correlated with CWB-S and CWB-O, with one exception: distributive justice was not correlated with CWB-O. This finding was unexpected given that employees can restore equity through behaviors subsumed within CWB-O (e.g., theft; Greenberg, 1990). Measurement problems do not appear to underlie this finding because both distributive justice and CWB-O correlated with all other study variables in the expected directions. Post-hoc analyses were conducted to examine correlations between distributive justice with each of the eight items used to measure CWB-O, including the item about theft and other items reflecting ways in which equity can be restored (e.g., an item about taking long breaks): none of the correlations were significant. One possibility is that younger employees who believe their pay levels do not reflect their effort and contributions are less likely to respond through CWB because they have lower expectations for receiving equitable pay.

Limitations

The results from this study are tempered by a few limitations. The sample comprised participants who were younger than the general workforce, which imposes limits on generalizability. Until these results are replicated, inferences drawn from this study apply most directly to younger employees. The results, however, should not be dismissed on this basis because it is important to understand CWB among younger employees who are most likely to engage in such behavior (Hollinger & Clark, 1983). Moreover, scholars have emphasized the need to understand workplace phenomena among young workers (Barling & Kelloway, 1999), who represent a substantial and growing proportion of the employee population (Fullerton & Toossi, 2001). Also possible is that the effects of the youthfulness of this sample on CWB was balanced to some extent by the greater proportion of females in the sample, who are known to commit fewer acts of deviant behavior (Hollinger & Clark, 1983). Participants were also students, but one study of CWB found no evidence that employed students responded differently.
than non-students (Fox et al., 2001). Nonetheless, these relationships should be tested using samples more representative of the employee population.

The cross-sectional and non-experimental design of this study provides no basis for causal inference. Researchers should use longitudinal designs to examine whether desires for revenge predict future CWB. Although speculative, the results found using a cross-sectional design may suggest that relationships among injustice, desires for revenge, and CWB persist over time. Consistent with this possibility, some avengers report that they engaged in multiple acts of revenge over considerable periods of time (Jones, in press).

Another potential limitation stems from the use of self-report for all measures. Although some researchers believe the best way to examine relations between perceptual variables and CWB is through self-report (e.g., Fox & Spector, 1999), the influence of same-source variance on these results cannot be ruled out. Nonetheless, there are reasons to have faith in the integrity of these findings. A Harmon’s single-factor test suggested that same-source variance was not overly problematic, and one study showed that most self-reported CWB items were unrelated to socially desirable responding (Aquino et al., 1999). Finally, results supported all hypotheses derived from theory about differential justice effects and the mediating role of revenge desires in relationships between specific types of justice and CWB. Nonetheless, replicating these results on CWB measured through some means other than self-report is needed to rule out the influence of same-source bias. In future studies researchers should also examine these relationships while controlling for individual differences that may relate to consistency between individuals’ self-reported revenge desires and CWB, such as social desirability or negative affectivity.

**Practical implications**

The results of this study are suggestive of two overarching implications for practice. First, if the effects in this study reflect causal relationships, CWB may be reduced by promoting justice. Specifically, CWB-O may be reduced by increasing procedural justice, and CWB-S may be reduced when supervisors treat employees with dignity and respect and provide explanations for decisions that affect people. However, given that shared variance among the four types of justice (not including unique variance) explained 14 per cent of the variance in CWB-S, managers should attempt to foster all types of justice. Managers may benefit from receiving training in the principles of justice, which has been shown to affect perceptions of fairness and behavior (Skarlicki & Latham, 1996).

Second, the results of this study suggest that once procedural or interpersonal injustice is perceived, the likelihood of CWB can be minimized through placating desires for revenge. The extent individuals blame an entity for perceived mistreatment is a critical predictor of revenge (e.g., Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001, 2006). Causal accounts from authorities may help deflect blame by convincing individuals that unfavorable events were beyond their reasonable control and due to external causes, which mitigates perceived unfairness (Shaw et al., 2003). However, causal accounts may be effective only when there are justifiable external causes for decisions and events that impact people unfavorably. Moreover, even well-intentioned managers and objectively fair procedures may be perceived as unfair by individuals with inaccurate information. Thus, tools are needed to address desires for revenge after injustice is perceived.

Revenge-motivated behavior often occurs several weeks after the initial desires for revenge (Bies & Tripp, 1996; Jones, in press); thus, there may be a “window of opportunity” during which time managers can mitigate desires for revenge. As part of any such effort, it may be necessary to demonstrate that transgressors have been punished and “justice has been served.” Researchers propose that employees are most likely to mete out justice themselves when they believe the formal systems are
incapable of doing so (Aquino et al., 2006). Thus, desires for revenge may be reduced by establishing mechanisms through which the outcomes of procedures can be appealed and interpersonal grievances can be expressed. When possible, it may be effective to communicate to victims how transgressors are reprimanded. Punishment can also be communicated in less formal ways: When managers admit responsibility and express sincere remorse and guilt for their actions, it provides a “down payment” toward restoring justice because it implies a degree of self-punishment (O’Malley & Greenberg, 1983).

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Author biography

David A. Jones is an Assistant Professor of Management at the School of Business Administration, University of Vermont. His primary research area is organizational justice, focusing on how perceptions of fairness form and on how employees respond to perceived fairness through job attitudes, OCB, revenge, and counterproductive work behavior. David also conducts research on recruitment, and on applicant and employee responses to socially responsible business practices.

References


