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Stop filling in the gaps! Rethinking organizational justice through problematization

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Résumé :

Organizational justice theory is the dominant approach to study justice in organization. It focuses on the justice perception and its influence on outcomes such as performance, theft, or justice climate. This article aims at paving new ways to tackle this issue. To do so, we propose a problematization of organizational justice theory, which leads to reveal unquestioned, but core assumptions of the theory, to challenge them, to suggest alternatives, and to evaluate these new propositions. Critical theory and sociology of critique are the two theoretical resources we used to apply a dialectical problematization. They provide countertexts against the functionalist stance of organizational justice theory. Therefore, this paper makes three contributions. It is one of the first systematic applications of the problematization methodology, and challenge de dominant framework to think justice in organizations.

Mots-clés : Organizational justice, problematization, critical theory, pragmatic sociology.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent article published in *Journal of Management Studies,* Alvesson and Sandberg [2013] have called for more imaginative and innovative research. This appeal relates to a set of papers and journal editorials inviting to raise challenging research questions and to produce inventive theories [Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011 ; Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011]. To do so, the authors encourage to problematize existing literature, rather than to fill in gaps. Responding to this call, we propose one of the first systematic applications of this research strategy by offering a problematization of organizational justice theory.

As a major theme in the field of organizational behavior, organizational justice theory "*refers to people's perceptions of justice in organizations"* [Greenberg, 1987 : 10]. It studies how distribution is implemented in terms of outcomes and procedures, how it is justified and what interpersonal relations it implies. This literature raises two major problems. First, organizational justice theory is the mainstream theoretical framework to study in

organizations. Therefore, its seminal references — and, more broadly, the literature they shape — become obligatory passage points that frame the way to study organizational justice [Callon, 1986]. It leads to only focus on some aspects of justice, through certain vocabulary, methods, and validity criteria, and thereby to neglect others which are illegitimated [Bourdieu, 1976] or simply unthinkable. Second, this restriction of thinking is all the more problematic that justice is a key issue for emancipation or the way of living together in a common world [Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991 ; Thévenot, 2001 ; Boltanski, 2009]. In sum, this article aims at opening the way of thinking justice in organizations beyond the

functionalist stance.

The present article proposes an application of the problematization methodology. Our process can be broken into six steps: i) we propose an overview of the organizational literature, ii) reveal its taken for granted assumptions, iii) evaluate them, iv) develop alternative assumptions, v) connect them with the audience, and vi) appreciate alternatives. To do so, we confront organizational justice theory to critical management theory on the one hand, and to sociology of critique[1] on the other. The two theories propose counter-texts to think about justice in organization. The former insists in the relation between justice and broader social structures

[1] Sociology of critique is also called economies of worth [Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991 ; Stark, 2009], pragmatist sociology [Reinecke, 2010 ; Jagd, 2011], sociology of critical capacity [Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999], or sociology of conventions [Denis and al., 2007].

[Benson, 1977]. The latter focuses on the way actors having critical competences make justice in action [Boltanski, 1990 ; Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991]. This dialectical problematization enables us to challenge core assumptions underlying the organizational justice literature [Astley and Van de Ven, 1983 ; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989].

This paper makes two contributions. First, we propose a systematic application of the problematization strategy that departs from existing literature review, as well as deconstructive or critical literature review. Established theories develop by taking for granted paradigmatic assumptions [Latour, 1988]. Although controversies may emerge at one level, the opponents generally share a set of assumptions about their particular fields at a deeper level [Bourdieu, 1976]. In this article, we move beyond the discussion of surface concepts, and reveal some of the deeper ontological, epistemological and political assumptions that underpin organizational justice theory. Second, critical theory and sociology of critique provide two counter-texts to interrogate organizational justice theory. The connection of these opposed literature enables us to identify alternative views to study justice in organizations [Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011]. The dialectical problematization especially points out justice is not everywhere in organizations. It suggests to analyze power relations as well as shifts from a regime of justice to another type of situation concerned by violence, routine, or, in some case, love (and conversely) [Boltanski, 1990]. Therefore, both critical theory and sociology of critique encourage paying attention to criticism, either to denaturalize power relations or subjugated situations, or to develop a more grounded version of criticism.

The article is structured as follow. We begin by discussing the originality, the interest and the method of problematization. We then problematize organizational justice theory following six steps identified above. Finally, we sum up and discuss our contributions both to organizational justice theory and organization and management studies broadly.

1. PROBLEMATIZATION AS A METHOD TO GENERATE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.1. Problematization vs. gap-spotting

Many journal editors and prominent researchers regret OMS articles have not produced influential theory for three decades [Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011, 2013]. For instance, Starbucks complains that “years pass with negligible gains in usable knowledge; successive

studies of topic appear to explain less and less". Although these claims are surely provocative and over pessimistic, some statements encourage taking them seriously. For instance, almost all influential theories within OMS have been brought in from the outside, not developed within OMS [Oswick and al., 2011]. Furthermore, the "publish or perish" credo is commonly acknowledged as one of the major causes of this pathology. The publishing imperative leads to focus on high-ranking journals within a designated journal list and, above all, to increase the rhythm of scientific production. These reasons shape what Alvesson and Sandberg [2013: 132] calls the *"incremental consensus-confirming"*, that is the general trend to replicate, confirm or extend previous works, rather than to critically challenge them. As a result, gap-spotting become the prevalent way of constructing research questions [Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011]. It consists in identifying gaps in the literature by suggesting competitive explanations, scanning for overlooked areas, or searching for shortage of a theory, and, based on that, to formulate specific research questions. Of course, several reasons may justify such a research strategy. It enables scholars to extend results or theory in new areas, to clarify concepts, to accumulate knowledge or to create a collective project [Lakatos, 1970]. Such a demarche is not condemnable per se; rather the problem is the hegemony of this way of constructing research projects. Capitalizing on previous works, gap-spotting reproduces an institutionalized line of reasoning [Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011, 2013], and thus discourages shifts of paradigm, which play a major role in the evolution of science [Kuhn, 1970].

Problematization aims at breaking with the linear development of research imposed by gapspotting. Problematization is "a critical rethinking of a particular theoretical tradition, a vocabulary and the construction of an empirical terrain" [Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011: 39]. It aims at thinking differently and raising new research questions by challenging epistemological, ontological or theoretical taken-for-granted assumptions. Yet problematization is not an end in itself. Indeed, the objective is not to destroy previous researches or to discover the incoherencies of a theory. On the contrary, problematization implies a dialogue between previous researches and a meta-theoretical position enabling the confrontation of different points of view [Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011]. As a result, problematization encourages a positive research agenda [Alvesson and Spicer, 2012]. Alvesson and Sandberg [2011] propose a six steps methodology. First, the identification of the literature leads to draw the limit of a field and target key texts. Second, the close reading of them conducts to reveal their taken for granted assumptions. Third, the evaluation of assumptions implies to assess the potential of challenging them. Fourth, a dialectical problematization consists in critically discussing taken for granted assumptions and,

thereby, developing alternative assumptions. Fifth, the connection with an audience enables to evaluate their relevancy. Sixth, the appreciation of alternatives allows to be reflexive and to point out limitations.

1.2. A dialectical problematization

Problematization implies a reflexive writing conducting to adopt different theoretical positions. Their confrontation leads to "dialectical interrogation" [Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011 : 252], which can be regarded as a *topos*. It is a standard form of argument serving as models for the invention of arguments [Poole and Van de Ven, 1989]. Dialectical interrogation encourages the researcher to use different stance to question one another. For instance, the dialectical opposition between micro and macro level, between strategic action and structural system provided inventive insights to theorize change [Astley and Van de Ven, 1983 ; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989]. In this article, we use two theoretical traditions as "methodological *resources* to open up and scrutinize assumptions underlying established theories" [Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011 : 252]. We select them according three criteria: their potential, their relevancy, their relation.

Our first theoretical resource is critical theory. Despite their plurality, critical management studies (CMS) acknowledge three main pillars: anti-performativity, de-naturalization and reflexivity [Fournier and Grey, 2000]. Justice can be related to these critical claims. First, CMS is anti-performative, in the sense that it should resist attempts to "develop and celebrate knowledge which contributes to the production of maximum output for minimum input; it involves inscribing knowledge within means–ends calculation" [Fournier and Grey, 2000: 17]. It conducts to think about justice beyond an instrumental rationality, by pointing out, for example, that justice is more than a mean to improve motivation or reduce theft. It also question the role of justice in organization by encouraging emancipation. Second, denaturalization leads to deconstruct reality and reveal hidden power relations. As Benson [1977] points out, organization are embedded in broaden social structures that generate contradictions. Therefore, CMS allow politicizing organizational justice. Third, reflexivity implies to challenge the implicit assumption around positivism that is often taken for granted in critical work. It encourages paying attention to the justice pluralism.

Our second theoretical resource is sociology of critique. It follows the pragmatic turn in social sciences [Thévenot, 2001]. Focusing on the actors' competencies, it acknowledges people are

able to interpret the world in which they are involved, to produce judgment about it and finally to act in compliance with their moral sense. Pragmatic sociology is a stimulating framework to enhance our knowledge of organizational justice for three reasons. In a first instance, pragmatic sociology emphasizes the moral capacities of persons [Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999] like moral models of organizational justice, such as Fairness Theory do [Folger and Cropanzano, 1998]. People are not (only) driven by causal factors such as dispositions or self-interest. The moral element is crucial in their action. “It drives both the agent in his conduct and determines the way other agents take hold of or “seize” this conduct” [Thévenot, 2001]. Therefore, morality is understood in a broad sense, which embraces different notions of common goods. Boltanski and Thévenot [2006] propose a model to analyse these different justice principles and the way they interact. They identify six idealtype constructions sustaining what is a fair “city”. In a second instance, pragmatic sociology interests in situations subjected to the imperative of justice [Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006]. It identifies the grammar of justice, that is to say the minimal conditions required to act in a fair way. It emphasizes how actors share their sense of justice to produce fair social devices. In a third instance, pragmatic sociology studies justice in action. Therefore, it allows us to go beyond perceptions of justice by analysing how people practically involve in the making of justice. These two traditions can be considered as antagonist [Boltanski, 1990 ; Benatouïl, 1999 ; Boltanski, 2009].

2. IDENTIFYING LITERATURE: THE LINEAR DEVELOPMENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE THEORY

Problematization begins by identifying a domain of literature for assumption-challenging investigations [Alvesson et Sandberg, 2011]. Adopting an empathic stance, we review the evolution of the theory. The linear development and incremental innovations we point out justifies the need for problematization to promote other ways of thinking organizational justice.

2.1. Organizational justice theory: yesterday, today, tomorrow (again)

Organizational justice theory has developed in two major directions, the structure of justice and the impact of justice judgments on various outcomes. In a first instance, it progressively revealed the distributive, procedural and interactional (interpersonal and informational) dimensions of justice. Distributive justice refers to perceptions of justice following an allocation

decision. The seminal work by Thibaut and Walker [1975] contributed to add a new dimension to the concept, that is procedural justice. Scholars have been interested in the rules that procedures should comply with to be considered fair [Leventhal, 1980], as well as the importance of the voice effect and control over process [Lind et Tyler, 1988]. At the end of the 1980s, organizational justice theory highlighted the "social side of fairness" [Bies et Moag, 1986 ; Greenberg, 1993a]. Interactional justice then appeared as a third dimension of justice. It has two facets. The interpersonal dimension is related to the respect and dignity displayed, while the informational dimension refers to the honesty and adequacy of the information provided [Greenberg, 1993a].

In a second instance, organizational justice theory has made contributions by highlighting the distinct effects of justice judgments on a wide array of work outcomes such as job performance [Materson and al., 2000], commitment [Korsgaard and al., 1995], sabotage [Ambrose, 2002], theft [Greenberg, 1993b]. The contributions were made possible thanks to empirical studies examining justice in various organizational phenomena, for example performance evaluation [Folger et al., 1992], pay raise [Folger and Konovsky, 1989], staffing [Gilliland, 1993], layoffs [Brockner and al., 1994].

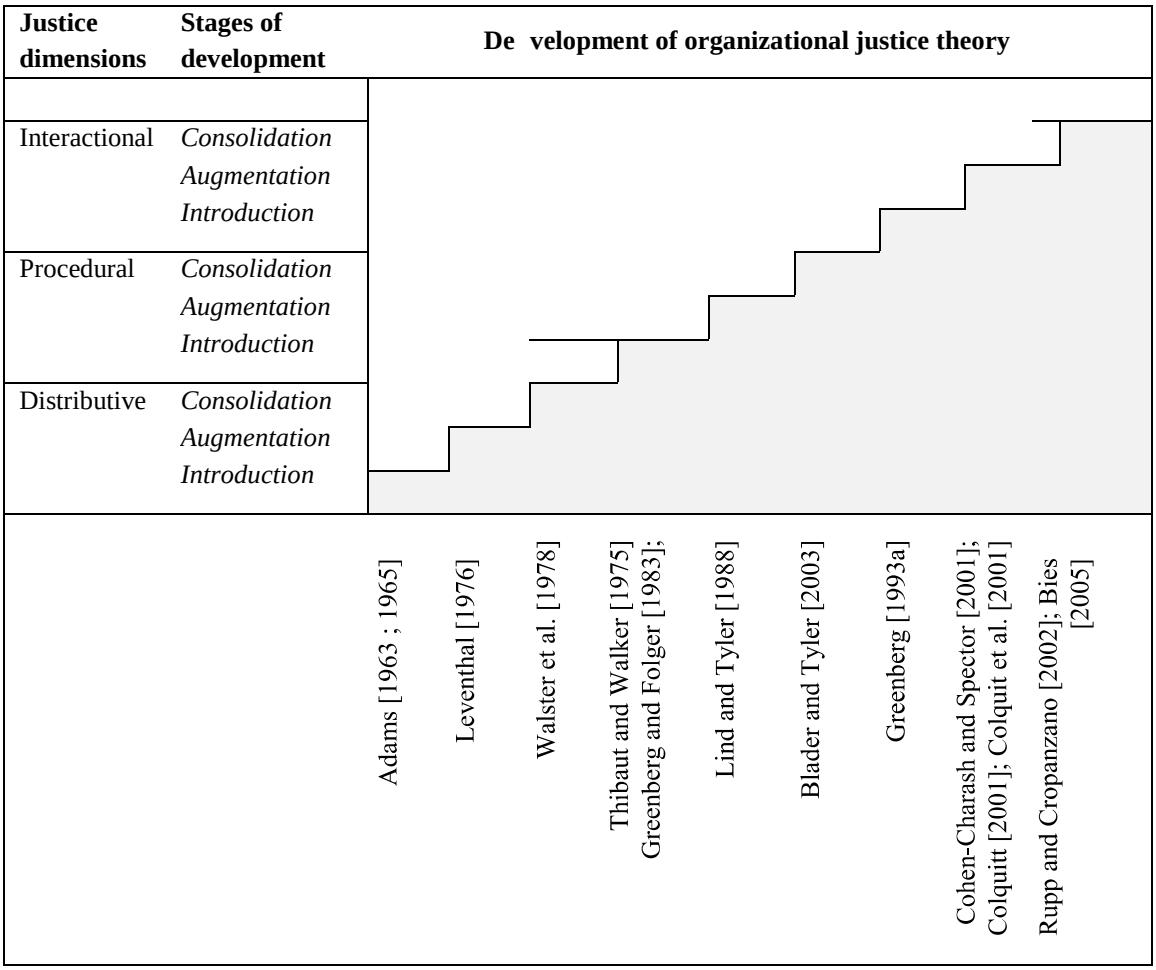
2.2. Breaking with linearity

In his seminal article, Greenberg [1990] chronicled the history of the field of organizational justice. His historical overview was summed up by a well-known chart recapitulating the theoretical development of each dimension: distributive justice and procedural justice. Each one is broken into three stages: elaboration (invention of the concept, displacement from another literature), augmentation (first critical reviews, clarification of the concept) and consolidation (reduction of controversies, agreement on definitions). Figure 1 updates this chart and sheds light on the cumulative project of organizational justice theory.

Figure 1 shows that organizational justice theory have linearly developed by defining the justice construct, periodically adding new dimensions, and consolidating them. This cumulative development is typical of a research program, which questions secondary assumptions, but rarely challenged its core assumptions [Lakatos, 1970]. Figure 1 reveals above all that controversies have waned, justice dimensions stabilized, and innovations become incremental since the early 2000s. In short, organizational justice theory seems mature.

FIGURE 1

Organizational justice theory as a cumulative research program



Against this background, future developments follow the following roads. First, scholars can deeper study the current dimensions of justice, and thus stay in the grey-zone. Current works focus on this strategy through replications, extensions to new contexts, additions of mediatory or moderating effects, and variations of the level of analysis. Second, researchers can try to extend the grey-zone, for instance by adding a new dimension to the justice construct or to investigate new level of analysis. Adopting these tactics, current concerns of organizational justice scholars seeks to widen the scope of the field in terms of the levels concerned within the organization and the phenomena that organizational justice help to understand. Today indeed organizational justice deals with perceptions of justice at the individual and collective levels [Li et Cropanzano, 2009], and makes distinctions between event justice and entity justice (supervisor/organization) [Cropanzano et al., 2001]. The concept of justice climate highlights the fact that supervisors and the organization are not the only sources of (in)justice. It

encourages taking into account the importance of moral norms and group relationships that people combine to foster a stabilized justice climate [Rupp et al., 2007]. In a second direction, organizational justice research now tackles issues relating to social justice thanks to various integrative models that were put forward to explain why justice matters [Ambrose, 2002]. They may be considered as three "roads" to justice [Cropanzano et al., 2001]. Firstly, the selfinterest model contends that individuals' concerns for fair procedures stem from the expectation that compliance with procedures will serve their own interests in the long-term [Lind et Tyler, 1988]. Secondly, the group-value/relational model suggests that justice concerns are related to the long-term engagement of individuals within the group [Tyler et Blader, 2000]. Justice matters because it provides information as to the status of the individual within the group and contributes to the construction of his/her social identity. Thirdly, the moral models states that individuals are moral beings who act and judge actions according to moral norms [Folger and Cropanzano, 2001].

All these roads consist in gap-spotting strategy. In this article, we argue that another avenue is possible, that is problematization. It consists in rethinking figure 1 as a whole by identifying and challenging its underlying assumptions. This strategy breaks with the linear development and follows routes that are more sinuous, conducting to radical innovations, and thus paving the way for shift of paradigm.

3. IDENTIFYING AND ARTICULATING ASSUMPTIONS

As Alvesson and Sandberg [2011] suggest, the problematization methodology implies selecting key texts in the literature in order to identify the underlying assumptions of the chosen field. We propose that the article "Moral Virtues, Fairness Heuristics, Social Entities, and Other Denizens of Organizational Justice" [Cropanzano and al., 2001a] is one of these texts regarding organizational justice literature.

3.1. Assumption identification

3.1.1. The "three roads to organizational justice"

The authors particularly insist on the importance on the moral motive for justice judgements.

> "(...) we recommend that researchers include Folger's (1994, 1998) moral virtues model as a means of deepening our understanding of why people care about justice. To date, the justice literature has been heavily influenced by the instrumental and relational (or group-value) models

> of justice. (…) Sometimes what we *do not say* about human behavior is as important as what we *do say*. If organizational justice theorists include only economic and social considerations, and exclude morality and ethics, then it is a short step to inferring that the former are important and the latter are not" [Cropanzano and al., 2001a: 199].

The quotation reveals that organizational justice theorists assume that 1. people care about justice 2. for economic and 3. social considerations and 4. for morality and ethics.

The self-interest model indeed posits that individuals are concerned about justice because 'playing by the rules' will finally contribute to achieve their own goals (economic considerations), whereas the relational model contends that justice in the group provides information as to the status of the member – his or her recognition by the rest of the group – which will influence his or her self-image (social considerations). If the motives of justice may be both economic and social, then people form justice judgments about everything and everyone, so that justice matters throughout the individual's working life, as indeed most of the organizational life is related to distribution (salary, promotion, workload …) and to the procedures that result in such allocation decisions.

Concerning the moral motive, we may add that individuals (members of the organization) expect the organization, supervisors, coworkers, etc [Cropanzano and al., 2001a: 184] to behave according to moral standards. Although all these entities (individual, supervisor, group, organization) are considered as independent 'units' in relation to each other, they all share some moral obligations, at least in people's minds.

3.1.2. Formation of justice judgments and consequences

As for the formation of justice judgments and their consequences, the authors suggest that

> "(...) outcome, process and interpersonal elements have the potential to cause distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. (…) These effects have interesting applied implications. They suggest that if one wants to raise *perceptions* of distributive and procedural justice, one could potentially change either outcome or process *elements*. If it were practically possible, it would greatly increase the flexibility with which firms could develop and display fairness." [Cropanzano and al., 2001a: 192].

1. Justice perceptions result from an aggregation of outcome, process and interpersonal elements. 2. Organizations may free themselves from the moral imperative and simply seek to appear fair. 3. They thus have the power to influence justice perceptions.

Compared with our previous paragraph, the moral imperative is not shared by organizations. Therefore organizations and individuals are not studied as a collective. Organizational justice theorists follow the traditional dichotomy between individuals and organization.

The authors also explain why organizations should strive to appear fair, if not to achieve fairness.

> "(...) perceived justice is, at least in part, the consequence of a moral transgression (Folger, 1998). A good deal of justice research has documented how people respond to these transgressions. In short, we repay the actions of others with corresponding actions of our own." [Cropanzano and al., 2001a: 183].

Every justice judgment is supposed to have effects whether positive or negative for the other (individual or organization) so that it is in the interest of the organization to ensure high levels of perceived fairness. This suggests that the organization and the supervisors have the means to analyze justice judgments although they are not explicit and that they may have alter them, especially through social accounts and causal accounts, so that they will not be harmed by retaliation.

3.1.3. Collective justice: measuring justice perceptions at the group-level

Li's and Cropanzano's article (2009) adds another aspect to organizational justice theory: unitlevel justice. One of the issues raised in the text is related to the scales used to measure collective justice. The authors introduce and assess compositional models of aggregation. The assumption here is that justice climate is characterized as an addition of individual perceptions.

3.2. Articulating assumptions

The study of Cropanzano's and als' article "Moral Virtues, Fairness Heuristics, Social Entities, and Other Denizens of Organizational Justice" (2001) has allowed to identify several assumptions underlying organizational justice theories which we can articulate as follows

The constant care for justice that individuals are supposed to display can be identified as an in-house assumption, that is an assumption "shared and accepted as unproblematic by its advocates" [Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011].

- Justice matters for individuals at all times because it serves various purposes in addition to the moral imperative.

- Justice serves individuals' self-interest
- The interactions with the group influence the self-image. Justice judgments inform members about their status in the group and in turn participate to shape their selfimage.
- Morality and ethics are one of the justice motives. The moral norm(s) is (are) not defined.
- Individuals endow organizations and supervisors with moral obligations and capabilities.
- Justice judgments necessarily influence individuals' attitudes and behaviors.

The in-house assumption is supported by an ontological assumption related to the conceptual dichotomy between individuals and organizations ("paradigmatic assumption")

- Individuals enter and maintain a relationship with their employing organizations.
- Individuals and organizations are considered as independent from each other
- Individuals and supervisors are independent from each other • Supervisors and organizations share common goals regarding justice
- Organizations and supervisors have no moral obligations per se.
- Their concern with justice is instrumental; they are concerned with the impact of (in)justice perceptions, not with justice per se
- They can assess tacit perceptions of (in)justice and influence them.

By articulating the various assumptions that are listed above we can define three major trends that underlie organizational justice theory. The first trend, "the pervasiveness of justice", places the importance of justice in organizational settings (the "what"). The second trend, "aggregation", refers to the methods and tools used to assess perceptions of justice (the "how"). Finally, the third trend," instrumentalization", supports the whole undertaking of organizational justice theory, that is a better understanding of the individual's psychological mechanisms which in turn contributes to increase managerial effectiveness.

4. EVALUATING ARTICULATED ASSUMPTIONS

4.1. Justice is a pervasive issue of organizational life

Individuals constantly appraise outcomes, procedures, and interactions in order to assess organizational or supervisory fairness because justice may serve a wide array of motives, including moral expectations regarding the organization and their supervisors. Therefore justice is to be found everywhere in the organization and beyond, as societal issues pervade organizational life. It affects and contributes to inform the relationships individuals have with others at work (other employees, supervisor, the organization at large) [Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997]. The justice judgments in turn affect a number of outcomes relevant to organizational life such as performance and commitment. Importantly justice within the organization impacts customers' attitudes [Materson, 2001]. The effects of internal perceptions of justice are to be felt externally, in the relationships between the organization and its stakeholders.

4.2. Organizational justice relies on aggregation as a measure of justice

Organizational justice research is based on aggregation as a means to account for the formation of justice judgments – how the various dimensions interact – both at the individual and group levels – how individual perceptions aggregate to form justice climates. Concerning the former, we briefly trace back the evolution of organizational justice theories about the interactions of justice dimensions. Initially, distributive and procedural justice were said to interact, then the interaction related distributive to interactional justice [Skarlicki and Folger, 1997] and finally a three-way interaction was evidenced [Cropanzano and al., 2005]. Distributive justice predicts better when interactional justice is low; however if procedural fairness perceptions are high, the impact of both distributive and interactional injustice is lower. More recently, the issue of aggregation was highlighted to account for the formation of justice climates. Li and Cropanzano [2009] listed the various methods that scholars may rely on to measure collective perceptions of justice. In other words, the aggregative method aims at better understanding how employees appraise their supervisors/organizations in terms of justice. Recently Hollensbe and als [2008] resorted to qualitative methods in order to explore the assessment of organizational fairness. Although their findings shed light on the role of other elements than organizational justice dimensions in the formation of justice judgments, they do not challenge the aggregation of dimensions as a measure. The level of analysis implies that perceptions of justice in groups must be measured through the aggregation of individual perceptions. Studies on justice climate

give evidence of the growing interest for justice in groups since the beginning of the decade [Nauman and Bennet, 2000 ; Liao and Rupp, 2005 ; Roberson, 2006]. Roberson's study (2006) of the formation of justice climate through sensemaking aims at a better understanding of the social construction of justice perceptions. The analysis of qualitative data shows that team members strive to make sense of outcome unfavorability or procedural injustice through their interactions. However, the author does not challenge aggregation as a measure of team agreement.

4.3. The sequence of organizational justice and its purpose

Organizational justice is concerned with a linear process from elements in the work environment (organizational phenomena) to the formation of justice judgments to their effects on a wide array of outcomes [Cropanzano and al., 2001b]. Research contributes to provide a complete picture of the factors influencing the formation of justice judgments, both pertaining to justice dimensions and other factors, and to assess which outcomes are affected by the resulting perceptions of (in)justice. Although research on justice climate – its formation and its effects on subsequent justice judgments – provides a renewed vision of organizational justice, it is integrated in the traditional linear process and contributes to refine a picture, which is necessarily still.

In order to complete the identification and articulation of the assumptions underlying organizational justice theory, we will now turn to the contribution it strives to achieve. The conceptual dichotomy between organization and individuals implies that they do not pursue the same objectives. People's concern for justice, whatever its motive might be, forces organizations to strive and display fairness – which conflicts with their economic objectives. A major contribution of organizational justice theory addresses managers and organizations; by better understanding how individuals and groups form justice judgments and more effectively measuring the weight of various variables and their interaction, they can set up strategies in order to appear fair and avoid the negative effects that perceptions of injustice would have on their performance. Cropanzano, Bowen and Gilliland [2007] state that:

> "Injustice is hurtful to individuals and harmful to organizations. (…) The lesson here is that organizational justice actually has to managed" [Cropanzano and al., 2007: 34-35].

The authors then set out to introduce specific techniques considered appropriate to manage justice-sensitive issues such as recruitment, layoffs, and conflict management in order to implement a culture of justice throughout the organization.

which allows implementing corrective measures or even organizational changes [Cropanzano and al., 2004] in order to improve the perceptions of justice and benefit from higher perceptions of justice in terms of the outcomes they affect.

The identification and articulation of the assumptions underlying organizational justice theory lead us to challenge the pervasiveness of organizational justice, justice as aggregation with a focus on individual psychological mechanisms, and therefore, the sequence of justice and the instrumental purpose of organizational justice theory. These assumptions mostly rely on the ontological dichotomy between individuals and organizations. We then suggest that the construction of an alternative assumption ground should provide a more integrative vision of justice.

5. DEVELOPING AN ALTERNATIVE ASSUMPTION GROUND.

5.1. Challenging justice as a pervasive issue

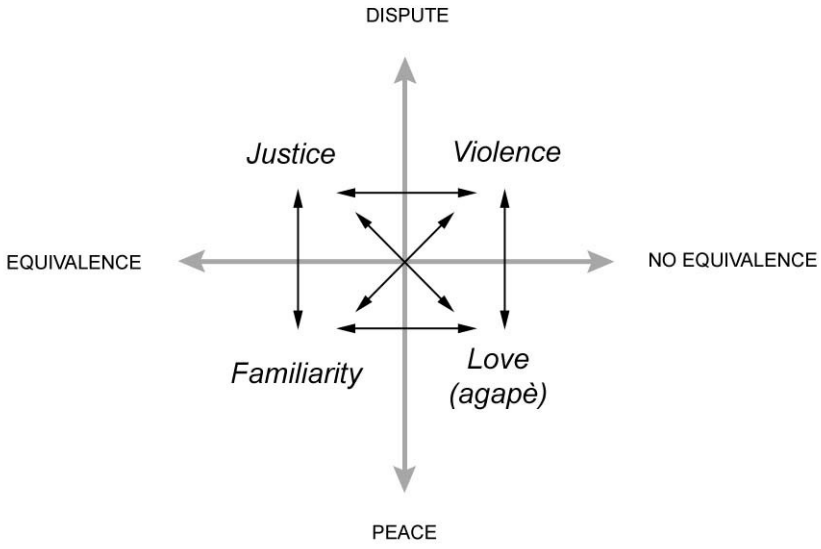
Resorting to Marxist theory, we may question the pervasiveness of justice by considering the issue of justice in terms of domination. “What is "a fair distribution"? Do not the bourgeois assert that the present-day distribution is "fair"? And is it not, in fact, the only "fair" distribution on the basis of the present-day mode of production?” (Marx, 1875: 14). Justice is thus defined by the dominated class, which does not try to appear fair but simply intends to impose its own model. Relying on this argument, Critical theory claims that organizations mostly reproduce the wider economic structures that are socially unfair [Benson, 1977]. Contrary to organizational justice theory, the assumption here is that injustice is inherent to organizational life. The case of gender illustrates the opposition between the two positions. For organizational justice, gender has been identified as a moderator, for example between pay raise and trust (Lee and Farth, 1999). For Critical theory, on the contrary, injustice to women is one of the characteristics of society at large and of organizations. Butler (2004) even includes sexuality to gender. Marxian theories, because they focus on organizational life as a reflection of social structures, require handling the matter of justice in terms of the general structures. They are thus completely

opposed to organizational justice theorists who deal with the individual level. Therefore no bridge is to be found between the two stances. As an alternative assumption ground, the sociology of critique may offer an interesting approach to justice in organizations as it focuses on interactions.

Boltanski (1990) posits that justice is one regime of action among others, so that it is not to be found in any and every social interaction. A regime of action is an explanation of the subjective and objective conditions required to complete an action. Boltanski (1990) identified four regimes of action constituting the pragmatic forms of an agreement and organized according to two dimensions (Figure 2). On the one hand, people may be involved in a dispute or not. Conflicts may arise about what is important or about the distribution of a good. On the other hand, people may converge toward an agreement by establishing equivalences or not. The operation consists in connecting objects, facts, or individuals, and to make them compatible by referring to something beyond them [Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991].

FIGURE 2

The four regimes of action



Following a principle of reversibility, figure 2 shows that situations may shift from one regime to another. Neither situations nor people are connected to a particular regime [Boltanski, 1990]. Several studies have dealt with these shifts. Chateauraynaud and Torny

[2000] studied how whistleblowers put into question a state of things that is taken for granted (familiarity) in order to launch a controversy and spread it into the public space (justice). For example, French chemist Henri Pézerat launched an alert as to the dangers of asbestos. The

controversy resulted in numerous suits and led to regulation as to the use of the so-called « miracle » material. Sociology of critique then posits situations as the level of analysis for the study of justice. Justice situations are characterized by a shift from another regime that can be observed through the operations of criticism and/or justification performed by the actors who thus make analytical efforts to categorize situational features according to general principles.

5.2. Challenging justice as aggregation

Organizational justice theory divides the concept of justice into separate conceptual dimensions – even though they interact – as well as the various levels in terms of individuals, groups and organization. Critical theory on the other hand aims at disclosing and challenging clear-cut separations in order to give evidence of the general injustice enforced upon the dominated groups. For instance, Nancy Fraser [2009] suggests that contemporary conflicts of justice require a revision of the "what" and the "who" of justice. Twentieth century responses to injustice in terms of redistribution and recognition lead to incommensurability of conflicting claims. To this a third aspect must be added: representation – the fact that some members of society are denied the right to participate in the social debate. As for the "who" of justice, conflicts of justice in a globalized world imply that the traditional "Westphalian" scale must be abandoned for a globalized mapping of political space. In other words, within national borders claims of injustice are smothered because the victims are not given a voice in the public space. In addition, criticisms of the globalized world must be global too, so that the traditional bounds of justice must be shattered. Fraser's theory of justice posits that both incommensurable traditional responses and clear-cut mapping of political space refer to outdated, distinct dimensions to study conflicts of justice that are now at play on wider scales.

The sociology of critique on the other hand suggests that justice is socially constructed; it results from the work of actors within a situation where they aim at reaching a legitimate agreement. However, actors do not re-create the world on every occasion. They rely on normative devices that are more or less stabilized. The strategy used by pragmatic sociology consists in putting together a kind of periodic table in which actors find the principles of justice that lead their actions. Such a strategy puts forward a limited pluralism, and thus appears as a third path between formal universalism – a unique and transcending principle of justice – and a radical pluralism – one person, one principle [Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999]. Boltanski and Thévenot [2006] built up a grammar of the principles of justice that people evoke when they are subjected to an imperative of justification. The grammar is articulated around five main terms. The

principle of justice expresses the worth of people in a given situation; it is the principle used to measure people. The size or worth may be measured in terms of the actual size (height), courage, or wealth. People who are being measured are said to be engaged in a trial. The latter may be compared to a sport competition where participants are ordered [Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005]. The 100-meter race allows identifying the world's fastest man. In order to interpret the results of a trial, it is necessary to select the relevant information. For a race, it is provided by the chronometer. For a trial to run smoothly several rules must be complied with. For example, sprinters are expected to show fair-play; to let someone win out of politeness, or to trip somebody up are regarded as abnormal behaviors. Thus, the trial is governed by elementary relationships between people. The end of the trial determines the worth of people. After they have been measured, they are known to be small or big, they are given individual qualities. The five terms of the system are defined for each world (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

The orders of worth

	Inspired	**Domestic**	**Opinion**	**Civic**	**Market**	**Industrial**
Justice principle (Worth)	Grace, non conformity, creativeness	Esteem, reputation	Renown	Collective interest	Price	Productivity, efficiency
Individual qualities	Creativity	Authority	Celebrity	Equality	Desire, purchasing power	Professional competency, expertise
Format of relevant information	Emotional	Oral, exemplary, anecdotal	Semiotic	Formal, official	Monetary	Measurable, statistics, criteria
Elementary relation	Passion	Trust	Recognition	Solidarity	Exchange	Functional link
Trial	Quest, introspection	Family ceremonies	Setting up, public events	Demonstration in favor of a cause	Contract	Rational test

Source: Adapted from Boltanski and Thévenot [1999]

5.3. Challenging instrumentalization

The sociology of critique posits that disputes of justice cannot be anticipated; neither can their settlement, because individuals always have a choice. Pragmatic sociology identifies an array of practices enabling people to end disputes and bring back peace [Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006]. The first solution consists in turning a blind eye on what goes wrong. Someone discovers a theft but decides not to raise the alarm because "it is no big deal", or because the cost of

denunciation (reactions of workmates, procedure) is considered too high. The second solution consists in clarifying the situation according to a single justice principle. The third solution consists in working to find an arrangement or a compromise between several justice principles. For example, FLO – a fair trade organization – sets the fair price of coffee by combining the market principle, which takes account of the market price, to the industrial principle (calculation of the complete production cost) and the civic principle (addition of a bonus for the development of producers' organizations) [Reinecke, 2010]. Finally, the fourth solution consists in using uncertainty strategically in order to blur the various justice principles [Stark, 2009]. Defining unclear objectives or using ambiguous words are widely used rhetorical strategies to reconcile diverging views [Jarzabkowski and al., 2010].

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our purpose in this article has been to open the way of thinking organizational justice. To this end, we first showed the maturity of organizational justice theory, and its trend to focus only on gap-spotting, rather to question its core assumptions. After that, we used problematization to challenge both explicit and implicit assumptions. Finally, a dialectical discussion enabled us to propose alternative assumptions inspired by critical theory and sociology of critique. In this section, we sum up the three main contributions of the paper.

In a first instance, gap-spotting is the prevalent way of constructing research projects, while problematization is rare [Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011]. The field of organizational justice theory is not an exception. Indeed, we have shown how it linearly develops through contributions that only completes, refines or just polishes previous researches. This paper is one of the first that systematically implements the problematization methodology and aims at breaking with this tradition. It critically interrogates deep assumptions and adopts a positive agenda. The article thereby departs from three attitudes towards literature review (figure 4). Firstly, we break with conventional literature review, which consists in explaining surface assumptions to corroborate them or to identify new relations between them. Organizational justice theorists typically write such a literature review to state the hypothesis they test. Sometimes the literature review can be larger in scope and provide a state of the art. Metaanalysis follows this way. Colquitt's and als' [2001] meta-analysis reviewed empirical studies and assessed the conceptual distinction between the four dimensions of organizational justice (distributive, procedural, interpersonal and informational). Nevertheless, it does not aim at challenging the assumptions of the field, but rather at pointing out blind zones in the literature

by highlighting what has been done and what could be done. Secondly, we depart from critical literature review, which a critical reading of a literature through a rival theory. Such a demarche is also called quasi-problematization and consists in claiming problematization, but smuggling "in a prefabricated, ready-made alternative" [Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011: 38]. For instance, Bourguignon and Chiapello [2005] use quasi-problematization when they impose their theoretical framework, sociology of critique, to think about organizational justice. They never discuss with other theoretical streams. The dialectical problematization enables us to avoid the trap of quasi-problematization. The triptych constituted by organizational justice theory, critical theory and sociology of critique systematically provides two counter-texts to evaluate theoretical assumptions. Put another way, each reading of organizational justice is challenged by two other interpretations. Consequently, this multiperspectives practice enables us to preserve the reflexivity of the problematization project [Alvesson and al., 2008]. Thirdly, we break with the deconstruction of an existing literature or text. Such a project is generally associated with critical theory. Inspired by post-structuralism (and Derrida's philosophy especially), it consists in closely examining textual areas where language betrays itself and reveals limitations, self-contradictions or excesses [Cooper, 1989 ; Calàs and Smircich, 1999]. For instance, Kilduff [1993] deconstructed the highly influential book *Organizations* written by March and Simon [1958]. These authors pretended filling a void in the literature by criticizing Taylor's scientific management. They claimed to substitute the mindless mechanical worker with a rational decision maker. Yet, Kilduff [1993] revealed how *Organizations* criticizes and celebrates the machine model at the same time, and, by doing so, returns to what it denounces. In some way, deconstruction share common points with problematization. It aims at opening "debate on the ideological underpinnings of organization theory" [Kilduff, 1993: 29] and, to do so, it focuses on core assumptions by privileging the investigation of the silencing, masked or unconscious way of thinking [Cooper, 1989 ; Kilduff, 1993 ; Calàs and Smircich, 1999]. Nevertheless, many scholars regret that deconstruction is a negative, rather an affirmative project. Since each text can be deconstructed, the risk is a perpetual problematization "leading to a sense of fatigue and a deficit of positive results" [Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011: 266]. That is a classical criticism addressed to critical management studies [Spicer and al., 2009 ; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012].

This perverse effect is called "overproblematization" [Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011: 266].

FIGURE 4

Ways of interrogating literature

	Positive	**Negative**
Surface assumptions	Literature review	Critical literature review
Deep assumptions	*Problematization*	Deconstruction

In a second instance, critical theory as well as the sociology of critique may provide fruitful alternative stances. Concerning the "what" question, critical theory posits that injustice is pervasive to organizational life where people are subjected to the same domination as in society at large whereas the sociology of critique suggests that justice is a regime of action among others. New research questions may then be raised as to the outbreak of justice disputes in organizational settings, when they do indeed disrupt the unquestioned routine work. As for the "how" question, critical theory sets out to uncover the pervading injustice of the wider economic structures by deconstructing traditional responses to conflicts. Sociology of critique, on the other hand, proposes a grammar of justice that represents the resources at hand for the reflexive action of criticism and justification of actors. Researchers may then fruitfully study the way disputes unfold and how people attempt to settle the disputes in organizational settings. Finally, critical theory and sociology of critique offer alternatives stances in terms of their contributions. The former aims at the emancipation of the dominated groups, while the latter strives to better understand the uncertainty of social life. By following the actors, researchers may achieve an in-depth understanding of the choices made by actors regarding justice disputes – whether they break out or not – and how these choices contribute to shape organizational life.

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