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Fairness and unfairness in projects

A study exploring what individuals perceive as fair or unfair treatment

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Anonymous in accordance with University of Leeds Ethical Standards.

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Executive summary

"Life should not be about getting used to unfairness but about how we can create an environment that provides a fairer experience for everyone"

"Life is not fair, get used to it" – a quote often attributed to Bill Gates, but originally by Charles J Sykes, which we believe should be challenged. Life should not be about getting used to unfairness but about how we can create an environment that provides a fairer experience for everyone. The motivation for this is not only about being good and decent humans but also about the negative impact unfair treatment has on individuals, organisations and projects. This study therefore explores what individuals perceive as fair or unfair treatment in projects, which factors influence their perceptions and subsequent behaviours, and how these impact on individuals, organisations and projects.

We found that individuals perceive fairness in projects along the three dimensions of organisational justice:

1. **Distributive justice**, which is concerned with the perception of fairness regarding the distribution of resources and rewards.
2. **Procedural justice**, which is focused on the fairness of policies, procedures, processes, rules, regulations, standards and systems that are established in an organisation or project.
3. **Interactional justice**, which relates to interpersonal treatment and informational exchange.

We also identified four factors that influence how individuals makes justice judgements about their treatment by an individual or organisation. These factors are:

- the source of the treatment (internal vs external to their own organisation)
- the temporality and frequency of the treatment
- the authority and accountability individuals hold
- the adoption of reflective practices

In terms of the impact of fair treatment, we determined positive effects on ways of working, project relationships and health and well-being. In contrast to this, unfair treatment caused detrimental effects on these issues.

We conclude our report with actionable recommendations for three groups: how the project profession needs to raise awareness of fair and unfair treatment and its impact; how organisations involved in projects need to build skills and capabilities to enable their employees to adopt fair working practices in projects; and how individuals, i.e. project professionals, need to take responsibility for their actions and behaviours towards project team members, colleagues and other individuals they work with in projects in terms of fair and unfair treatment.

1. Introduction

"Being good is easy, what is difficult is being just"
(Victor Hugo, 1802–1885)

Does it matter if people are treated in a fair and just manner when working on projects? What does it even mean to be treated fairly in the project context? The perception of fairness in the working environment – also known as organisational justice – is acknowledged to be subjective and "in the eye of the beholder" (Colquitt et al., 2018, p. 159). A significant number of studies conducted in the context of permanent organisations demonstrate that positive outcomes for the organisation as well as the employee can be expected if justice rules are adopted. This ranges from extra-role engagement of employees (also known as organisational citizenship behaviour) to the improved acceptance of organisational change to enhanced satisfaction with promotion decisions. However, we know much less about the perceptions and impact of fairness in the temporary and often inter-organisational context of projects. With this study we aim to develop an in-depth understanding of organisational justice in projects, especially how it is characterised, which factors influence justice judgements and to shed some light on the impact of fair or unfair treatment in the project context. More specifically, we aim to answer the following research question: *How is organisational justice in inter-organisational projects characterised and which factors influence justice judgements?*

The adoption of fair principles and procedures in the project context also has practical relevance from a broader societal perspective as projects play a key role in relation to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs): firstly, projects are and will continue to be the vehicle to implement the change required for many of the goals, and secondly, how projects are managed and how people are treated in projects can directly contribute to create a better and more sustainable future for everyone. With this study we focus on the latter and aim to demonstrate how fairness in projects contributes to laying the foundations for achieving UN SDGs (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Organisational justice and the UN SDGs

2. Background

It is widely recognised that organisational justice is comprised of the following three dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice and interactional justice (Figure 2). Distributive justice is concerned with the fair distribution of outcomes and it is assumed that the three allotment rules of equality, equity and need are used by individuals to evaluate their perception of distributive justice (Cropanzano et al., 2007). Procedural justice is concerned with the procedures that are used for decision making, and justice rules such as process control, decision control, consistency, bias suppression, accuracy, correctability, representativeness and ethicality are employed to make justice judgements (Thibaut and Walker, 1975; Leventhal, 1980). Interactional justice is concerned with the communication of outcomes and procedures and it has been suggested that individuals utilise four criteria to assess their perception of interactional justice: truthfulness, justification, respect and propriety (Bies and Moag, 1986). It is important to note that the different dimensions interact with each other and can strengthen the positive impact of justice or reduce the negative impact of injustice depending on their presence or absence.

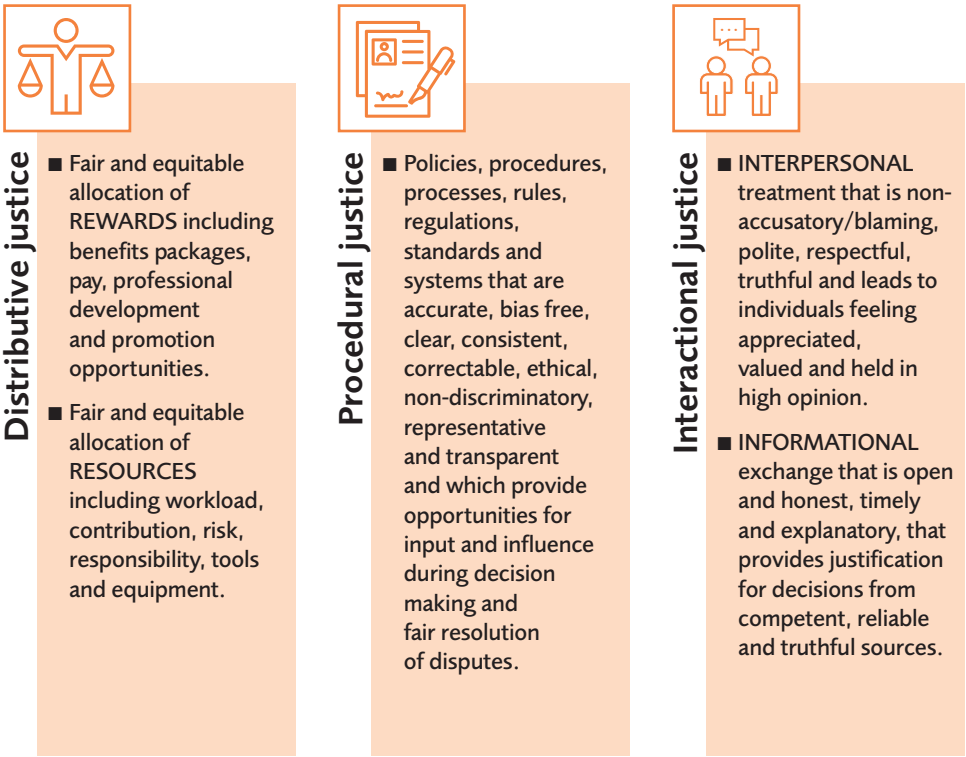

Figure 2: Dimensions of organisational justice

As outlined above, certain justice rules can be associated with each dimension (Table 1). These justice rules can serve as a guide on what is generally perceived as fair treatment with the underlying principles summarised in Table 1. Individuals typically use the traditional dimensions of organisational justice to evaluate the treatment from a particular source they had previous experiences with (Rupp and Paddock, 2010), employing a mix of justice rules. A current unknown is which justice rules individuals employ in temporary and inter-organisational project settings. In order to enable the fair treatment of individuals in projects we need to know which justice rules they employ and how they form their justice judgements.

Dimensions		Rules	Underlying principles
Distributive[b]		Equity	Outcomes are allocated according to contributions
		Equality	Outcomes are allocated equally
		Need	Outcomes are allocated according to need
Procedural[a]		Process control	Procedures provide opportunities for voice
		Decision control	Procedures provide influence over outcomes
		Consistency	Procedures are consistent across persons and time
		Bias suppression	Procedures are neutral and unbiased
		Accuracy	Procedures are based on accurate information
		Correctability	Procedures offer opportunities for appeals of outcomes
		Representativeness	Procedures take into account concerns of subgroups
		Ethicality	Procedures uphold standards of morality
Interactional	Interpersonal[c]	Respect	Enactment of procedures are sincere and polite
		Propriety	Enactment of procedures refrain from improper remarks
	Informational[c]	Truthfulness	Explanations about procedures are honest
		Justification	Explanations about procedures are thorough

Table 1: Justice rules

[Table adapted from Colquitt and Rodell (2015); [a] Rules taken from Thibaut and Walker (1975) and Leventhal (1980); [b] Rules taken from Adams (1965) and Leventhal (1976); [c] Rules taken from Bies and Moag (1986) and Greenberg (1993)]

When individuals perceive fairness or unfairness this usually leads to certain reactions in their emotions, behaviour and attitude. These reactions create an impact on different levels such as the individual, the project or the organisation (Figure 3). Among positive outcomes, previous research has shown that organisational justice improves the acceptance and legitimacy of an authority (Tyler and Lind, 1992), facilitates the acceptance of organisational change (Greenberg, 1994) and that individuals are less likely to engage in disruptive behaviour (Greenberg and Lind, 2000), such as rule breaking, sabotage or theft. In addition, fair treatment is also linked to enhanced ethical behaviour at work (Jacobs et al., 2014) and values are also recognised as moderating the relationship between justice perceptions and work behaviour (Fischer and Smith, 2006).

Some initial studies on the impact of organisational justice in the project context have been conducted and they generally show promising results. An investigation into inter-organisational unfairness in the construction industry showed a lack of procedural and distributive justice resulting in unfair risk distributions and power imbalances (Loosemore and Lim, 2015). Additionally, it has been found that organisational justice has a positive relationship with project performance (Shafi et al., 2021; Unterhitzenberger and Bryde, 2019) explained through various mediating variables. Organisational justice has also been adopted as a theoretical lens to develop the concept of fair project governance (Unterhitzenberger and Moeller, 2021). However, we still lack a more nuanced understanding of the impact of fair or unfair treatment in projects beyond project performance.

Individual: Impact on career development, status, job performance, job satisfaction, job security, organisational commitment, behaviour, attitude and health and well-being

Project: Impact on project performance (time, cost, quality), client satisfaction, participant commitment to/identifying with project and organisational citizenship behaviours

Organisation: Impact on competitive advantage, organisational change and development, delivery of objectives/tasks and retention of workforce

Figure 3: Impact of organisational justice on individuals, projects and organisations

We also know from previous research, that the source of fair or unfair treatment influences the reactions individuals display in response to this treatment (Lavelle et al., 2007). However, in terms of characteristics and organisational context of sources only a very limited number of factors has been considered (Marques et al., 2017): formal authority, trustworthiness and leadership style are characteristics of sources that can influence justice judgements, whereas the psychological distance, bureaucracy of an organisation or the justice climate, i.e. the shared justice perceptions of a team, represent the organisational context. Individuals working in projects are often exposed to a duality of authority through their own line manager and the project manager/client. In intra-organisational projects the individual and the authority would be within the same organisation, whereas in inter-organisational projects they are typically from a different organisation. We currently have only very limited information about how the inter-organisational context of projects and of a justice source in particular influences justice judgements.

To summarise, organisational justice is a fairly well-researched construct in the context of permanent organisations with a variety of positive impacts on individuals and organisations established. However, previous studies have also demonstrated the context sensitivity of justice judgements with projects being a neglected context. We therefore need to investigate how fair treatment is characterised in the project context, which rules individuals employ to make justice judgements, which factors influence how justice perceptions are evaluated in projects and what the project-related impact of fair or unfair treatment is. This study sets out to address these issues and establish an in-depth understanding of fair and unfair treatment in projects.

3. Overview method

In order to establish this in-depth understanding of the perceptions of fairness (and unfairness) in an inter-organisational project setting, we adopted a qualitative research design which allows us to explore the characteristics, application and impact of organisational justice in projects in detail. The required in-depth understanding cannot be generated through a quantitative study, which would measure variables and test relationships statistically but would not be able to capture the lived experiences of individuals working in projects. For our qualitative study, we decided to utilise a multi-method strategy (Figure 4) consisting of a combination of diary method (phase 1) and interviews (phase 2).

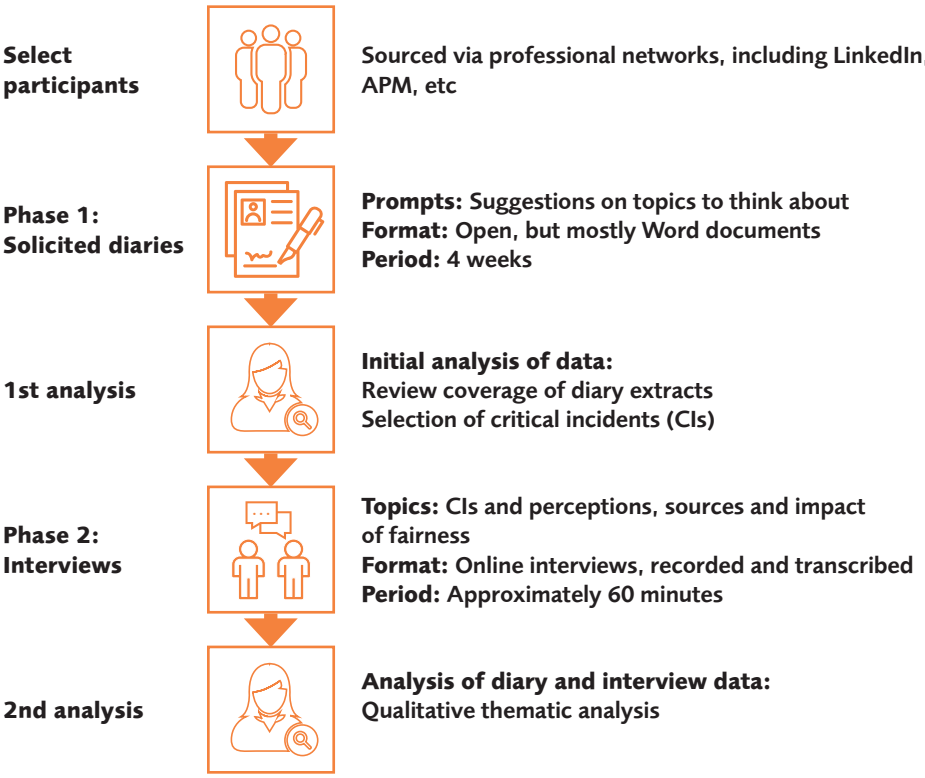

Figure 4: Research process

"We adopted a qualitative research design which allows us to explore the characteristics, application and impact of organisational justice in projects in detail"

Diary method is scarcely adopted in management research but has shown very promising results in other fields (Hyers, 2018). It has the unprecedented potential to record time-sensitive and context-specific details which are difficult to capture with other methods. The records and reflections of participants collected in diary method enable us to capture the meaning and importance participants associate with certain events. For phase 1, we asked participants to write a solicited diary over a duration of four weeks, i.e. we provided them with some prompts, such as "How did you feel today?" or "Was there any time you felt treated fairly or unfairly today? Could you please explain this in more detail?", but emphasised that they were free to write about any other issues they experienced as well. The participants were able to choose the medium of their diary freely (e.g. voice recordings, hand-written, typed), but all participants submitted typed diaries. Submission was required once a week over a four-week period. In total we received diary records for 118 days over 75 pages worth 28,920 words from 10 individuals.

Additionally, at the end of the diary exercise we conducted an interview with the participants to allow for reflection and follow-up. The interview (phase 2) was split into two parts: part one adopted the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954), where we explored some significant events reported in the diaries in more depth, and in part two we led a more general discussion on perceptions of fairness, sources of fairness and its impact, as well as a reflection on the diary exercise itself. In total we conducted 476 minutes of interviews with the 10 individuals, which resulted in 148 pages of transcripts equalling 69,969 words.

Some additional reflections on the method chosen, as well as an overview of our participants with details on their role, industry and experience, is provided in Appendix 1.

4. Findings

In the following we present the combined findings of phase 1 (diary) and phase 2 (interview) from the multi-method study outlined above. The findings are structured into three themes which answer the research question (Figure 5): 1) Characteristics of organisational justice in projects; 2) Factors influencing justice judgements in projects; and 3) Impacts of organisational justice in projects.

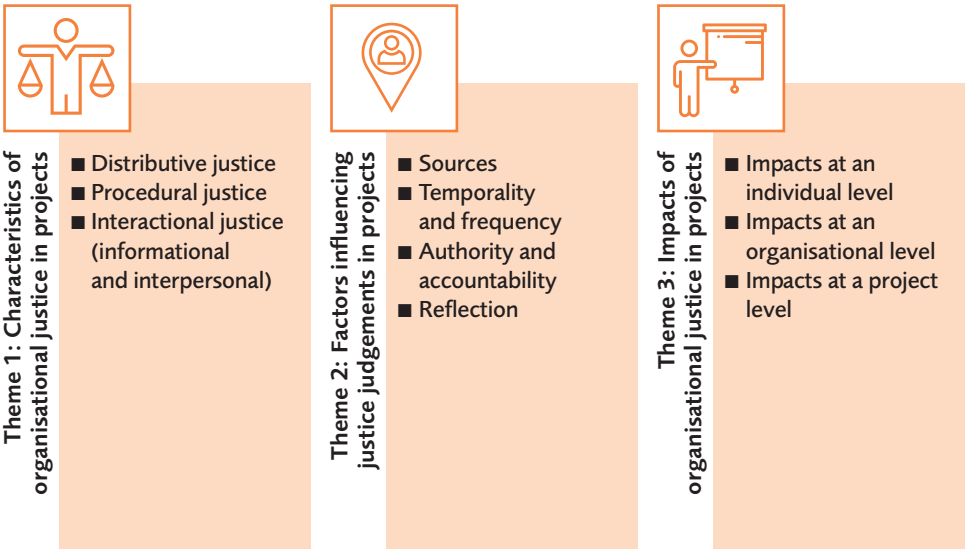

Figure 5: Key organisational justice themes

4.1 Characteristics of organisational justice in projects

Participants provided insights into what constitutes organisational justice in projects and which justice rules they employ. They also frequently highlighted the presence of perceptions of unfairness, which were different to the mere absence of fairness. They characterised their perceptions of fairness and unfairness along the three established dimensions of organisational justice, namely distributive, procedural and interactional, with important nuances highlighted for the project context.

"Participants provided insights into what constitutes organisational justice in projects and which justice rules they employ"

Distributive fairness is generally concerned with the fair and equitable distribution of resources and rewards. We found that in the project context, a fair resource allocation mainly refers to an appropriate workload and sufficient staff on projects as well as a fair balance of authority and accountability. The reward allocation is perceived as fair, mainly based on non-financial criteria such as praise or opportunities for professional development. Conversely, unfairness in terms of resources is characterised as being required to carry out actions for which the participants lack the capabilities or experiences, being expected to work under undue pressure or workload, or being inappropriately delegated responsibility for actions. Unfair reward allocation is again of non-financial nature and characterised as not receiving due recognition for their contributions to a project.

Procedural justice is about the fairness of policies, procedures, processes, rules, regulations, standards and systems which are established in an organisation. For individuals working on projects this relates to the organisation which employs them, as well as to the project organisation. Fairness in this regard is described as projects and/or organisations having clear rules as well as appropriate measures for conflict resolution. Additionally, projects and/or organisations are expected to enable project team members to contribute to, and be involved in, transparent decision making and to create environments where project participants can hold open and honest debates. Fairness regarding procedural aspects is also characterised as being able to voice opinions and feeling represented. Procedural unfairness would include projects and/or organisations having processes and procedures that are not accurate, consistent, transparent or clear, or maintaining environments in which project team members were excluded and their voice and opinion was not listened to.

Interactional justice relates to interpersonal treatment and informational exchange. Interpersonal fairness in the project context is characterised by being treated in a supportive, respectful, trusting and understanding way by others in the project team. Informational fairness is defined by clear, truthful and timely communication from competent and reliable project team members, who lead by example and make decisions in the best interests of others. Whereas interpersonal unfairness is characterised as being unfairly blamed for something, being treated with a lack of respect or being subjected to argumentative, accusatory, dismissive or threatening behaviour from another member of the project team. Informational unfairness would involve not just a lack of clarity in communication between project team members, but a lack of communication and feedback from project team members who are perceived to be unreliable, or incompetent, in a manner that is neither open nor honest and does not adequately justify or explain decisions.

4.2 Factors influencing justice judgements in projects

Through the study, we gained insight into the contextual nature of justice perceptions and identified a number of factors which influence how individuals evaluate their perceptions of fair, or unfair, treatment in projects. These factors contribute to justice judgements and influence how acute and relevant the treatment is perceived.

4.2.1 Sources

We found that the source of the fair/unfair treatment reportedly influences the way the treatment is perceived. Participants described experiencing both justice and injustice from sources within the organisation that employs them (intra source) and from external organisations such as the project organisation, the client organisation or other organisations involved in the project (inter source). Additionally, they differentiated between individuals as sources of treatment and organisations as sources of treatment. Figure 6 indicates the different sources of fair or unfair treatment as experienced by project team members. In general, the treatment by an individual intra source, e.g. a line manager, is perceived as more acute than the treatment by an organisational intra source, e.g. the employer organisation, or an individual inter source, e.g. the client's representative, with the treatment by an organisational inter source, e.g. the client's organisation, being the least acute.

Figure 6: Source of treatment

"The level of familiarity with the source also plays a role when it comes to tolerating injustice or not"

In more detail, this means that an act of (in)justice from an intra source, in particular from a line manager, was felt more acutely than an act of (in)justice from an inter source, for example, from a project client or the client organisation. This differentiation was particularly prevalent for unfair treatment rather than fair treatment. This means that despite there being a certain hierarchical and contractual working relationship with inter sources, their behaviours and actions are not evaluated in the same ways as behaviours and actions of intra sources when it comes to fairness perceptions. Project team members expect that intra sources (for example, a line manager or an internal peer) understand the challenges they face on a daily basis, and know the objectives they are working to. Therefore, their treatment is scrutinised by the project team members and evaluated within the shared organisational context. This makes perceptions of injustice more acute. In contrast to that, inter sources (for example, a project client who works for another organisation) share less context and understanding, and a higher degree of injustice is tolerated despite perceptions of unfairness by the project team members. Individuals even come up with excuses to justify potentially unfair behaviour of external sources based on lack of detailed knowledge of challenges and objectives. The level of familiarity with the source also plays a role when it comes to tolerating injustice or not. Participants described how they had been willing to tolerate unfair treatment from someone they had a personal friendship with, or respect for, while they would not have tolerated this from someone they didn't respect in the same way.

While organisational justice is typically associated with the treatment of an individual by an authority, we also found evidence for other sources which lead to justice perceptions. Participants described how they react to fair or unfair treatment by subordinates such as (project) team members or (sub) contractors and how this impacts their behaviours and actions. Additionally, a more indirect evaluation takes place when fair or unfair treatment of others is observed. This is, for example, the case when a project team member experiences an act of (in)justice, from, say, a line manager or client to another individual. The treatment is not experienced directly but indirectly through observation. This observation influences how the justice perception is evaluated.

4.2.2 Temporality and frequency

We also found that temporality and frequency were factors which influence the evaluation of perceptions of fairness and unfairness. While an act of injustice from an inter source might be viewed as short and temporary, the treatment by an intra source has a permanency about it. Project team members perceive that the relationship associated with this act of injustice from an intra source will continue indefinitely (or at least until the working relationship is terminated). With no end in sight for the relationship, higher standards and more importance are associated with the treatment stemming from an intra source. However, an act of injustice by an inter source is perceived to be temporary as the relationship associated with it is finite. It will end when the project ends. A higher degree of injustice is tolerated despite perceptions of injustice because the working relationship is often not set up to last. Moreover, experienced participants set current treatment in context to their treatment in previous projects and were willing to tolerate higher degrees of injustice if they had negative experiences previously. However, a willingness to tolerate unfair treatment was not indefinite. Participants also described how frequency influences their perceptions of treatment: an infrequent act of unfairness would be tolerable, while frequent acts of unfairness would not.

4.2.3 Authority and accountability

Participants described how the balance between authority and accountability influenced their justice perceptions in two ways. Firstly, the individuals' own authority and accountability had an influence on how they perceive fair or unfair treatment. They felt it was unfair to be held accountable for actions that they did not hold the authority to influence. If individuals were held accountable for actions which were beyond their control and they knew that the source was aware of that, they perceived a strong sense of unfairness. This factor was particularly relevant for project team members or more junior project managers who were accountable for their work but had only limited authority and independence. However, individuals who viewed themselves as being free to work independently, and whose role had an appropriate balance between authority and accountability, did not perceive unfairness to be an issue. They felt that they had latitude to make their own decisions with less input from internal or external authorities (intra or inter sources), equating to less interference and fewer opportunities for unfairness to occur. These were typically project managers with a certain level of seniority. Secondly, participants used contextual information available to them to evaluate if the source had authority over their actions and hence should be held accountable and judged against the justice rules or not. In these circumstances, the individuals' feeling of unfairness was mitigated by their recognition that the source's actions were beyond the scope of their authority.

"Experiences over time were used by participants to balance unfair treatment, with individuals describing how they had learned to let things go and choose their battles"

4.2.4 Reflection

Some participants also displayed characteristics of reflection which influenced how they evaluated fair or unfair treatment. If they believed their own actions had influenced how they were treated by others (for example, project participants described how they could have done things differently, or lacked knowledge and skills), then they expressed an understanding of the behaviours of others. In contrast to this, if the participant recognised that the source of injustice was or had been treated unfairly themselves, had their own pressures or challenges, was ill-informed, lacked capabilities, or had different goals, then this knowledge again influenced the evaluation of their treatment, and they displayed empathy towards the source of injustice. Experiences over time were also used by participants to balance unfair treatment, with individuals describing how they had learned to let things go and choose their battles. This was also reflected in the way that individuals evaluated if a situation provided potential for their personal gain and benefit. If that is the case, acts of unfairness are more likely to be tolerated and accepted. Aligned to this, individuals assess their priorities, and if they conclude that supporting the successful delivery of a project and reward commitment is their priority, they will tolerate unfair treatment to avoid project failure.

4.3 Impacts of organisational justice in projects

Having identified characteristics of justice in projects and the factors influencing justice judgements, we also explored the impact of fair and unfair treatment. We found that justice perceptions have an impact on three levels: on the individual who experiences or observes the treatment, on the project within which the treatment is happening and on the organisations involved in the project, including the individuals' own organisation.

4.3.1 Impacts at an individual level

The most direct and acute impact from fair and unfair treatment is on the individual level, where fairness perceptions lead to positive impacts and unfairness perceptions to negative impacts on the individual (Figure 7).

Positive impacts of fairness

- Ways of working - personal and professional development, career and work opportunities
- Relationships
- Feelings – appreciated, confident, supported, valued, happy, of enjoyment, respected
- Health and well-being – emotional (self-perceived status) and physical (abilities)

Positive impacts of unfairness

- Changes to ways of working – communicating, effectiveness, standards, confidence to challenge and say no

Negative impacts of unfairness

- Ways of working – job security and workload
- Relationships
- Feelings – annoyed and disappointed, anxious, embarrassed, frustrated, stressed, pressurised, taken for granted
- Health and well-being – emotional and physical exhaustion

Figure 7: Impact of organisational justice on the individual level

Participants expressed how feeling as if they had been treated fairly resulted in them feeling appreciated, respected and valued. This was then reflected in their attitude and commitment towards their job, which subsequently improved their performance, satisfaction and perception of job security. Fair treatment also had a positive effect on the individuals' health and well-being as they felt that they had a voice and had the tools (emotional and physical) to carry out their work effectively. Longer term, participants also reported positive outcomes for their career development, work opportunities and relationship building with both internal and external contacts.

Conversely, feelings of injustice had left participants feeling annoyed, disappointed, frustrated, overworked, stressed, taken for granted and undervalued. Participants explained how their experiences of injustice directly influenced their ways of working, their health and well-being and ultimately their job security. The immediate influence on the ways of working was generally negative, as mentioned above, and reflected in their future actions and interactions with the source. However, interestingly, we found that experiences of injustice can lead to the development of coping strategies and a change in practices and behaviours in the longer term. Through surviving injustice, some individuals embraced learnings and, for example, reported changes in the ways they communicated with others and how they became more vocal in voicing their opinions due to prior experiences of unfairness. This change did typically not occur immediately but came into effect with a time lag and was only embraced as learning once there was a sufficient emotional distance to the experience and the source.

4.3.2 Impacts at an organisation level

While our study did not focus on the organisational level, i.e. the permanent employer organisation, frequently negative impacts of perceived injustices on this level were highlighted by participants. Positive impacts of perceived fairness on the organisational level were discussed, for example, positive impacts on the work environment and workforce performance. However, interestingly, it appears that unfairness leaves stronger and more lasting impressions on the organisational level, with participants feeling the need to report those. Failing to finish tasks and hit deadlines set by their own organisation were expressed as outcomes of intra-organisational injustices, such as excessive workloads, lack of resources, etc, while participants were willing to move jobs rather than work for organisations with incompatible values. These failures initially impacted their own organisation but also had the potential to have an indirect effect on the project level. Reputational damage is also a potential outcome for organisations perceived as acting unfairly, both in respect to external relations with clients or collaborators and also internally, for example, in terms of relationships between different parts of the organisation.

However, we also found that, as outlined above on the individual level, in the longer term individuals change behaviours and practices based on unfair treatment and this change can potentially have a positive impact on the organisation. By capturing learnings from past experiences, participants explained how new ways of working had been introduced to improve future organisational processes and procedures (for example, the introduction of frameworks for future projects, etc). Interestingly, this change, which creates an impact on the organisation, is typically driven by individuals who experienced unfairness, and not by the organisation in which context the unfair treatment occurred.

4.3.3 Impacts at a project level

Participants also described the impact of fair or unfair treatment on relationships with (internal and external) project team members. While injustice negatively impacts on personal and professional relationships between project team members (for example, a loss of trust or losing contact with others, etc), feelings of justice developed bonds of trust between project team members.

Participants reported how injustice, both within their own organisation (intra source) and from the wider project/external project organisations (inter source), negatively impacted on project delivery (in respect to project programmes, costs and viability). Moreover, injustice caused a loss of skills and knowledge, with team members leaving, and resulted in confused communications in the project. However, in line with findings on the individual and organisational level, experiences of injustice occasionally led to changes in practices driven by individuals who experienced the unfair treatment. This can lead to teams working together to improve project process effectiveness (for example, more effective project meetings, etc) and to support planning for future phases of projects, or new projects (for example, introducing new ways of working, etc).

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study is to advance what is known about organisational justice in projects and, in particular, in inter-organisational projects. This is relevant because the way in which individuals in projects are treated – or more specifically the way in which they perceive their treatment – has far-reaching impacts. With this study we have provided some insights into what the characteristics of organisational justice in projects are, which factors influence justice judgements and how fair or unfair treatment impacts on individuals, projects and organisations.

"From time to time individuals embrace experiences of injustice as learning opportunities"

We found that perceptions of fairness in projects are broadly aligned with the established dimensions of organisational justice, namely distributive, procedural and interactional justice. The fair and equitable distribution of resources and rewards (*distributive justice*) mainly relates to workload allocations and appropriate resources to conduct the project, whereas the distribution of rewards is overwhelmingly associated with non-financial criteria. *Procedural justice* is about the fairness of policies, procedures, processes, rules, regulations, standards and systems which are established in the organisations involved in the project, i.e. their own organisation, the project organisation and other organisations such as the client organisation. The interpersonal treatment and informational exchange in the project (*interactional justice*) is characterised by being treated in a supportive, respectful, trusting and understanding way, with clear, truthful and timely communication from competent and reliable project team members.

As the perception of fairness lies "in the eye of the beholder" (Colquitt et al., 2018, p. 159), the identification of factors which influence justice judgements also enhances our understanding of organisational justice in the context of projects. We identified four relevant factors: 1) The source of the treatment, which can be differentiated based on two criteria: individual vs organisational source and inter- vs intra-organisational source. Depending on the source, individuals amend their justice judgements and might expect more or less fairness or tolerate more or less unfairness. 2) Temporality of the source and frequency of treatment impacted on the perceptions of fairness, with a more permanent source such as their own organisation being held to higher standards than a more temporary source such as a client or project team member, and the frequency of unfair treatment also exacerbating perceptions. 3) The balance between authority and accountability was a critical factor in how individuals perceive fair or unfair treatments, with individuals who have a good balance typically experiencing less unfair treatment than individuals who are accountable for their work but have little authority over it. And finally, 4) reflection impacted on how individuals perceive fairness, with some participants reflecting on their own actions, analysing the context others work in or using previous experiences to inform their judgements.

The impact of fair or unfair treatment of individuals in projects typically occurs on three levels. Firstly, there is an impact directly on the individual experiencing the treatment, with the impact of fair treatment generally being positive and the impact of unfair treatment generally being negative. The impact was mainly experienced in terms of ways of working (current and future), relationships, feelings and health and well-being. Secondly, on the organisational level, delivery of objectives, reputation, process effectiveness and retention of workforce are impacted by acts of justice or injustice. And thirdly, on the project level, fair or unfair treatment had an impact on how the project team collaborates, on how the project performs and on the display of project citizenship behaviour. Across all levels, we identified that individuals draw on their previous justice experiences and that fair, as well as unfair, treatment can lead to improved practices, changed ways of communication and amended behaviours. From time to time some individuals embrace experiences of injustice as learning opportunities. In the longer term, this can occasionally have positive impacts on the individual, the organisation and the project.

With projects existing not in isolation but gaining ever-increasing relevance for society, we also set out to show how fair treatment in projects could contribute to achieving the UN SDGs. While the treatment of individuals in projects does not directly contribute to the achievement of UN SDGs in the way, for example, net zero technologies do, it contributes indirectly by creating a fair and equitable working environment for project professionals. Hence, with this study, we demonstrate that the way individuals in projects are treated indeed has an impact on health and well-being (SDG 3), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), reduced inequality (SDG 10) and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16). While we did not find direct evidence for the impact of organisational justice on gender equality (SDG 5), we propose that this is indirectly supported by the justice rules through their focus on the fairness of distribution of resources as well as on the control over processes for decision making.

Overall, we believe that sustainable industrialisation (SDG 9) can only be achieved if we also consider the individuals working on the projects towards sustainable industrialisation, as well as their working conditions. And this includes fair processes, procedures and treatment.

6. Recommendations

To support the project management community in the adoption of fairer principles and procedures, practical and actionable recommendations for the profession, organisations and individual practitioners are outlined below.

Profession: Raising awareness
Across the profession, the awareness of the impact of fair and unfair treatment on individuals, organisations and projects needs to be raised. Fair and unfair treatment does currently not receive sufficient attention within our profession, with no mention of it in the most recent *APM Body of Knowledge* (BoK) *7th edition* or in any other publication by professional bodies. A first step to raising awareness is the publication of this research report, which should be followed up by appropriate dissemination activities such as webinars, workshops and further publications or articles. APM may wish to build on this study and incorporate findings into future guidelines for the profession, such as APM BoK 8th edition or a revision of the competence framework. Additionally, APM may wish to explore funding future research in this area to develop an even better understanding of fair and unfair treatment in projects, e.g. how the perceptions of fairness impact on the health and well-being of project professionals, or test quantitatively how sources, experiences and other factors influence justice perceptions in projects.

"Each and every individual working in projects can make a difference in creating a fair and equitable working environment for the other project team members"

Organisations: Building skills and capabilities
Organisations need to invest in building the skills and capabilities of project managers and project team members in how organisational justice can be adopted in projects. This requires organisations to train leaders and senior project professionals in the relevance and application of justice in projects. It also necessitates embedding fair principles and procedures in project team working and enabling individuals to implement fair process and procedures within their own authority. This requires organisations to have an open and transparent culture which provides a psychologically safe environment for individuals to speak up. This should also be facilitated through the implementation and sustainment of appropriate governance arrangements such as fair project governance (Unterhitzenberger and Moeller, 2021), and includes considerations of an appropriate balance of authority and accountability across project roles and clarity over roles and responsibilities. Organisations also need to ensure that learning from past organisational injustice is captured, understood and not repeated.

Individuals: Taking responsibility
Individuals responsible for projects or working in projects need to think about and be aware of the impact their actions have on subordinates, contractors, peers and project team members. However, awareness is insufficient in this context. We know from previous research that it often varies how fairly a source perceives their treatment of others and how fairly the receiving individual perceives the treatment. This means sources need to actively seek feedback from individuals if their actions are following justice rules and, hence, if they are improving justice perceptions in projects. These can be simple considerations of how their treatment could add excessive workload/stress to others, or how something that is 'important' for one team member is not 'urgent' for another team member, or how able team members are to voice their opinions and influence the project.

Overall, each and every individual working in projects can make a difference in creating a fair and equitable working environment for the other project team members. However, this effort should not stop at the individual level and needs to be supported by organisations working on projects, ranging from client to contractor to supply chain organisations, and also requires the commitment from thought leaders in the profession.

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Appendix 1 – Methodological reflections and details

As mentioned earlier, diary method has not been used widely in management research and there are always certain risks associated with adopting a method which is new to the field of study. Our initial concerns with this method were the commitment required by the participants and the amount and quality of data we would receive. The commitment concern was considered as a high risk as the diary study requires the recording of diary notes over a four-week period. With participants being busy project managers or team members, we expected to lose some along the way who abandon their contribution. We therefore set out to recruit approximately 15 participants with the aim to have at least 10 completing phase 1 (diary) as well as phase 2 (interview). We achieved this aim, but the mitigation measure of over-recruiting proved to be necessary as four individuals abandoned their participation.

The amount and quality of data was also considered a risk, due to a lack of comparable studies. At the time of study design, it was unknown how participants would respond to the task and the experience of diary writing. We therefore split the study into two phases, with an additional interview at the end of the diary exercise which allowed us to ask follow-up questions and explore critical incidents in more depth. This proved to be a valuable supplement to the diaries as a small number of participants indeed found it challenging and therefore recorded rather brief diary notes which did not provide the richness expected from this method. Through the interviews, we were able to mitigate this to a certain extent.

The details of our participants are outlined below:

ID	Role	Organisation type	Experience	Phase 1 (diary) and Phase 2 (interview)
ID1	Project manager	Construction	0-5 years	Phase 1 & Phase 2
ID2	Project engineer	Boiler manufacturer	0-5 years	Phase 1 & Phase 2
ID3	Project manager	Education trust	Over 20 years	Phase 1 & Phase 2
ID4	Project planner	Construction	Over 20 years	Phase 1 & Phase 2
ID5	Principal mechanical engineer	University	Over 20 years	Phase 1 & Phase 2
ID6	Research facilitator	Design and consulting	0-5 years	Phase 1 & Phase 2
ID7	Communication lead	Communications	Over 20 years	Phase 1 & Phase 2
ID8	Change portfolio manager	Government	10-20 years	Abandoned participation during Phase 1
ID9	Building services manager	Construction	10-20 years	Phase 1 & Phase 2
ID10	Project manager	Nuclear operator	10-20 years	Phase 1 & Phase 2
ID11	Project manager	Infrastructure consultancy	10-20 years	Abandoned participation during Phase 1
ID12	Commercial manager	Design and consulting	10-20 years	Abandoned participation during Phase 1
ID13	Project manager	Airport operator	10-20 years	Phase 1 & Phase 2
ID14	Project manager	Management consultancy	0-5 years	Abandoned participation during Phase 1

Table A1: Details on study participants

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