

The Effect of Work Stress and Coping on Organizational Justice: An Empirical Investigation of Turkish Telecommunications and Banking Industries

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The aim of this paper is to investigate the role of coping mechanisms and work stress on employees' perceptions of organizational justice. A survey of 211 white-collar employees in the banking and telecommunications industries was taken. Multiple regression analyses were performed in order to understand the effect of coping mechanisms and work stress on organizational justice. The results showed that overall perception of justice is affected negatively by work stress and positively by coping mechanisms, except emotion-focused coping. However, sub-dimensions of organizational justice showed distinctive relationship patterns. Thus, it was concluded both individual and organizational determinants play a role in employees' perceptions of organizational justice.

Key words: organizational justice, work stress, coping, telecommunication, banking

Introduction

The issue of justice is important in the organizational context, as well as in daily life. Employees compare their wage, benefits, how they are treated, and how much they receive information. It is important for organizations to be seen as just by their employees, because several studies found significant negative relationships between perceptions of injustice on the part of employees and work related outcomes. Organizational justice is related with job performance (Aryee et al. 2015; Cropanzano, Prehar, and Chen 2002; Rupp and Cropanzano 2002), job satisfaction and turnover intentions (Akram et al. 2015; Alexander and Ruderman, 1987), organizational commitment

(De Cremer et al. 2004; Liden et al. 2003; Tepper 2000); counterproductive work behaviours (Fox, Spector, and Miles 2001; Jawahar and Stone 2015), trust (Colquitt and Rodel 2011; Katou 2013) and organizational citizenship behaviour (Liden et al. 2003; Moorman 1991; Rupp and Cropanzano 2002). These studies showed that organizational justice is an important matter which organizations must manage effectively. However, employees' comparisons contain their individual judgments, in other words their perceptions. The decision of the fairness of an organization depends on a highly subjective experience.

Employees who are facing the same sort of unfair practices might appraise these situations in different ways. As Greenberg (2001, 246) suggested, 'Justice might always be a potential concern, but that potential will materialize only sometimes'. An unfair distribution or treatment might still be considered fair depending on certain environmental and individual characteristics. Justice considerations are 'influenced by outcomes one receives from the organization, organizational practices and procedures, and characteristics of the perceiver' (Cohen-Charash and Spector 2001, 282). Since it is a perceptual attribution, individuals' personal characteristics play an important role in the process of evaluating fairness in the workplace. For example, the study by Wanberg, Bunce, and Gavin (1999) showed that employees who have high scores in negative affectivity are more likely to perceive their organization and organizational practices as being unfair compared to individuals with a low negative affectivity score. Besides the level of stress employees produce and strategies to deal with it, stress also depends upon their personal characteristics. Again, positive and negative affectivity alters individuals' responses against stressful situations, and their strain levels (Fogarty et al. 1999). Also, big five personality traits are related to different coping mechanisms in varied levels (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart 2007). Personality dimensions of extroversion and neuroticism are highly effective in explaining the stress levels of individuals (Fontana and Abouseri 1993). Emotional intelligence, in addition to being a highly personality-related construct, is also a good predictor of distress and avoidance (emotion-focused) coping mechanism (Matthews et al. 2006).

Investigating specific personality differences on organizational justice is not the main aim of the research; however, one should accept that the justice issue is highly perceptual and subjective. Therefore, stress levels and coping mechanisms, which depend highly upon one's personality, should not be underestimated while deter-

mining organizational justice perceptions. In order to broaden the understanding of differences in perceptions of organizational justice, work stress and coping mechanisms that are chosen to deal with stressful situations at work are considered here. A quick literature review on work stress, organizational justice, and coping mechanisms will be mentioned briefly. Then, the results of the research performed on 211 employees from the telecommunications and banking industries will be provided.

Literature Review

WORK STRESS

Psychological stress is defined as 'a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well being' (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, 21). When it comes to work stress, definitions also follow the Person-Environment Fit as well. For example, Cooper and Marshall (1976, 11) conceptualizes work stress as 'a negative environmental factor or stressors (e.g. work overload, role conflict/ambiguity, poor working conditions) associated with a particular job'. Besides Blau (1981, 280) states, 'where either an environmental (job) demand exceeds a person's response capability, or the person's capabilities exceed the environmental demand, the resulting misfit represents stress'. It is clear from these conceptualizations that work stress requires an employee to feel a misfit between her capabilities, resources, or demands and the expectations from the work environment.

Work stressors that create an unfit for the employee can be classified into several dimensions. Stressors might be intrinsic to the job (e.g., poor physical working conditions, work overload, time pressures). They might be related to the role in the organization (e.g., role ambiguity, role conflict), related to career development (e.g., over promotion, under promotion, lack of job security), related to relationships at work (e.g., poor relations with the boss, subordinates or colleagues, difficulties in delegating responsibility), and/or related to organizational structure and climate (e.g. little or no participation in decision-making, office politics) (Cooper and Marshall 1976).

COPING MECHANISMS

Individuals' judgment about the person-environment relationship fit depends on their cognitive appraisal processes. Primary appraisal includes judgments about whether an encounter is irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful. If an individual decides that a

situation is stressful, then in the secondary appraisal they evaluate the process and decide which coping options are available. Thus, coping is defined as ‘constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person’ (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, 141). Nevertheless, some individuals cannot simply adapt their attitudes and behaviours in accordance with the environmental demands, while others are able to do so (Cooper and Marshall 1976).

Coping mechanisms or strategies can be classified as problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and social support-seeking coping mechanisms. Problem-focused coping refers to the ‘attempts to alter or manage the situation’, while emotion-focused coping refers to ‘attempts to reduce or manage emotional distress’ (Latack 1986, 377). On the other hand, ‘attempts to obtain advice or express emotions’ are identified as coping by seeking social support (Litman 2006, 274).

ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE

The literature on organizational justice was primarily concerned with fairness of resource distribution, referred to later as *distributive justice*. Adams’ (1963) equity theory can be shown as the basis for distributive justice, and carries with it the main assumption that inequity results from the inconsistencies between the inputs and outcomes of one person relative to another. Thus, whenever a person feels that his/her inputs and outcomes are not congruent with the reference person’s inputs and outputs, inequity exists (Adams 1963). Later work that focused on the appropriateness of resource allocation processes, or the justice of the processes that lead to decision outcomes, pointed out procedural justice (Colquitt 2001; Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007).

However, as time passed it became clear that it is not only the distribution of outcomes or decision-making processes that influence perceptions of fairness (Bies 2001). People are also influenced by the interpersonal treatment they receive from others. A third form of justice, interactional justice, was coined by Bies and Moag (1986) and defined as ‘people’s concerns about the quality of interpersonal treatment they receive during the enactment of organizational procedures’. In recent years, interactional justice perception has started to be evaluated in two sub-dimensions as interpersonal and interactional justice. Interpersonal justice is defined as ‘the degree to which people are treated with politeness, dignity, and respect by authori-

ties or third parties involved in executing procedures or determining outcomes', while informational justice 'focuses on the explanations provided to people that convey information about what procedures were used in a certain way or why outcomes were distributed in a certain fashion' (Colquitt et al. 2001, 427).

THE EFFECT OF WORK STRESS AND COPING ON JUSTICE PERCEPTIONS

Adams (1963) proposed that inequity carries a stress mechanism and this idea has been supported by further studies showing that injustice perception produces stress and stress related health problems via directly influence strain, and via mediating or moderating the stress and strain relationship (e.g., Elovainio, Kivimaki, and Vahtera 2002; Judge and Colquitt 2004; Tepper 2000; 2001; Zohar 1995). Organizational justice dimensions have significant relationships between psychological distress and stress symptoms of depression, anxiety and emotional exhaustion (Tepper 2000; 2001). There are also other approaches to justice and stress relationship such that organizational justice perceptions are considered as an additional source of stress. Role justice concept and proposing justice as a work stressor while examining its relationship with counterproductive work behaviours are examples of this view (Fox, Spector, and Miles 2001; Zohar 1995). Contrary to the common conceptualization in the literature, this paper views work stress as an antecedent of organizational justice perception. In other words, several work related stressors effect employees' perceptions of organizational justice.

As for work stress and coping mechanisms, studies showed that chosen coping strategies create differences in individuals' stress levels. Peng et al. (2012) found that emotion-focused coping has a significant relationship with psychological distress, while problem-focused and social support-seeking coping styles do not. Snow et al. (2003) have found similar results with emotion-focused coping and negative psychological outcomes. It was generally the result that problem-focused coping is positively related to employee wellbeing, while emotion-focused coping is negatively related (Tsaur and Tang 2012; Sunny-Hu and Cheng 2010). Also, these coping strategies have buffering and moderating effects on the relationship between work stress and wellbeing (Tsaur and Tang 2012). Moreover, social support from co-workers and supervisors can reduce the stress levels of employees and help them use active coping strategies more (Blau 1981; Snow et al. 2003). Previous studies have shown that work stress and coping mechanisms are closely related to the organizational jus-

tice perceptions of the employees. However, previous models on the topic have proposed a reverse relationship: organizational justice affects work stress. In this paper, it is thought that injustice practices at work are insufficient to explain work stress. Some stressors related to work might highly affect organizational justice perceptions, yet while studying work stress, as an aggregate construct, it is difficult to distinguish the unique effect of organizational justice perceptions among lots of work stressors that are highly interweaving. It is not asserted here that organizational justice can't be a predictor of work stress; rather it is more meaningful for organizational justice to be a consequence of work stress. Employees who are more stressed might be more alerted for unjust situations. Stressful situations and individual characteristics/attitudes might be more affective on the formation of justice perceptions in a highly complex work environment. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study:

- H1 *Overall justice perception will be affected by work stress and coping mechanisms more specifically justice will be affected negatively by work stress and positively by coping mechanisms.*
- H2 *Procedural justice perception will be affected negatively by work stress and positively by coping mechanisms.*
- H3 *Distributive justice perception will be affected negatively by work stress and positively by coping mechanisms.*
- H4 *Informational justice perception will be affected negatively by work stress and positively by coping mechanisms.*
- H5 *Interpersonal justice perception will be affected negatively by work stress and positively by coping mechanisms.*

Method

The analyses were based on the data collected from 211 participants working in banking and telecommunications industries. All items used in this study were taken from previously used and validated scales. They were independently translated, and then back translated by bilinguals. Differences between the original and the translated version were assessed, and some items were changed. To further determine the validity of scales, explanatory factor analyses and reliability analyses were carried out. While testing the proposed hypotheses, regression analyses were applied. According to collinearity statistics, tolerance and VIF, multicollinearity is not a concern affecting the proposed models. The findings will be presented in the following sections.

SAMPLE

211 employees from different institutions in the banking and telecommunications industries participated in the study. Banking employees were considered due to the findings of previous studies showing the industry as highly stressful and competitive (e.g., Khat-tak et al. 2011; Michailidis and Georgiou 2005). The telecommunications industry was also chosen due to major restructuring attempts after privatization and liberalization of the industry in recent years in Turkey. After these privatization processes, there has been huge amount of ambiguity regarding job security and organizational change. Thus, employees from two industries that are highly insecure and competitive were selected for inclusion in the sample.

In order to collect data, the convenience sampling method was used. People who wanted to participate in the study were sent a link to the online survey. According to the frequency statistics, the demographic profile of the participants is as follows, in approximate numbers. In terms of age, 6% of the respondents were below 25, 48% were 25–9, 30% were 30–4, 7% were 35–9, and 10% were 40 and above. In addition, 53% of the respondents were female, while 47% of them were male.

The education level of our sample was high; 86% of the respondents had a bachelor's or master's degree. 39% of them worked in banking, 61% worked in telecommunications industry. In terms of the experience in the industry, 9% had less than 1 year of experience, 31% had 1 to 3 years of experience, 24% had 3 to 5 years of experience, and 36% had more than 5 years of work experience in their industries.

MEASURES

Organizational justice. Colquitt's (2001) justice scale was used in this study. Respondents were asked to rate about their ideas for the outcomes, procedures and interpersonal relations and information acquisitions in their workplaces on a 5-point Likert scale. The reliability of the overall scale had a 0.91 Cronbach's alpha value, and following Schmitt's (1996) suggestions, the sub-dimensions were also found to be satisfactory as well (procedural justice: $\alpha = 0.85$; distributive justice: $\alpha = 0.88$; interpersonal justice: $\alpha = 0.50$; informational justice: $\alpha = 0.91$).

Work stress. Employees' work stress was measured on a 16-item scale developed by Judge, Boudreau, and Bretz (1994). Respondents were asked to rate how much stress they produce while facing with

certain conditions in a 5-point Likert scale. The Cronbach's alpha value for this scale was 0.82.

Coping scale. In order to measure different coping styles of individuals, Şahin and Durak's (1995) adopted Turkish scale was used at first. However, after conducting a pilot study among 50 research assistants at a public university, it was found that most of the items of the scale needed to be deleted in order to increase the reliability value. As a result of this situation, Folkman et al.'s (1986) Ways of Coping Scale was translated to Turkish, abridged, and adapted. It was factor analysed and reduced to three dimensions including problem-focused, emotion-focused and social support-seeking coping mechanisms. In our version, there were 17 items at first but one of the items in emotion-focused coping was deleted because it lowered the reliability of the overall scale. All of the sub-dimensions had satisfactory reliability values ($\alpha = 0.81$; $\alpha = 0.78$; $\alpha = 0.78$ respectively).

The measures used in this study were taken from highly accepted questionnaires in the literature. Thus, validity and reliability of these measures were tested several times proving construct and content validity. Besides, as mentioned before, internal validity and reliability of proposed variables were found to be satisfactory.

Results

Correlations among the study variables can be seen in table 1. Consistent with the previous research and expectations, work stress is significantly and negatively related with overall justice and sub-dimensions of justice. Problem-focused coping mechanism is not significantly related with distributive justice; and emotion-focused coping mechanism is not significantly related with procedural and distributive justice dimensions. Moreover, problem-focused and social support-seeking coping mechanisms are positively related with organizational justice perceptions; while emotion-focused coping mechanism is negatively related. This preliminary analysis indicated that work stress and coping mechanisms are significantly related with justice perceptions of the employees.

In order to test the hypotheses, Multiple Linear Regression was employed. Detailed results of the regression analyses can be found in table 2. H1 was partially supported. Work stress and coping mechanisms explained 18.3% of the variation in overall justice perceptions, however adjusted R^2 stayed in 17% showing that some of the variables did not contribute much to the model. Work stress was negatively related with overall justice perception. Problem-focused coping and social support-seeking coping mechanisms were posi-

TABLE 1 Correlations among the Study Variables

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1)	–							
(2)	0.68**	–						
(3)	0.75**	0.42**	–					
(4)	0.81**	0.41**	0.42**	–				
(5)	0.71**	0.40**	0.37**	0.61**	–			
(6)	-0.22**	-0.25**	-0.14*	-0.14*	-0.19**	–		
(7)	0.30**	0.28**	0.12	0.32**	0.30**	-0.07	–	
(8)	0.26**	0.19**	0.18**	0.26**	0.26**	0.11	0.26**	–
(9)	-0.15*	-0.03	-0.07	-0.20**	-0.19**	0.15*	-0.28**	0.11

NOTES Variables: (1) Overall Justice, (2) Procedural Justice, (3) Distributive Justice, (4) Informational Justice, (5) Interactional Justice, (6) Work Stress, (7) Problem Focused Coping, (8) Social Support Seeking Coping, (9) Emotion Focused Coping. ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

tively related with overall justice perception. On the other hand, emotion-focused coping mechanism did not significantly contribute to the proposed model. In a similar vein, H2 also partially supported, since emotion-focused coping mechanism again did not significantly contribute to the model. Work stress was negatively related with procedural justice perception. Problem-focused coping and social support-seeking coping mechanisms were positively related with procedural justice perception.

The model testing H3 revealed that work stress and coping mechanisms only explained 6.5% of variation in distributive justice. This time, neither emotion-focused nor problem-focused coping mechanisms significantly contributed. Only, social support-seeking coping was positively related with distributive justice perception. On the other hand, work stress was negatively related with distributive justice perception.

Moreover, H4 and H5 related to informational and interpersonal justice perceptions yield similar results. Both informational and interpersonal justice perceptions were negatively affected by work stress and emotion-focused coping mechanisms, while positively affected by problem-focused and support-seeking coping mechanisms.

Discussion

The study aims to broaden the understanding about the role of work stress and coping mechanisms on the organizational justice perceptions of individuals in the workplace. Firstly, the effect of work stress

TABLE 2 Regression Results

Dependent variable	Independent variable	β	t	Sig.	R^2	Adj. R^2	F	Sig. (F)
Overall Justice	Stress	-0.21	-3.34	0.00	0.18	0.17	11.57	0.00
	Problem Focused Coping	0.20	2.85	0.00				
	Social Support Seeking Coping	0.25	3.67	0.00				
	Emotion Focused Coping	-0.09	-1.38	0.17				
Procedural Justice	Stress	-0.26	-4.02	0.00	0.16	0.14	9.80	0.00
	Problem Focused Coping	0.24	3.47	0.00				
	Social Support Seeking Coping	0.15	2.15	0.03				
	Emotion Focused Coping	0.06	0.94	0.35				
Distributive Justice	Stress	-0.15	-2.21	0.03	0.07	0.05	3.58	0.00
	Problem Focused Coping	0.05	0.69	0.49				
	Social Support Seeking Coping	0.19	2.64	0.01				
	Emotion Focused Coping	-0.05	-0.69	0.49				
Informational Justice	Stress	-0.13	-1.98	0.05	0.18	0.16	10.96	0.00
	Problem Focused Coping	0.21	3.02	0.00				
	Social Support Seeking Coping	0.24	3.51	0.00				
	Emotion Focused Coping	-0.15	-2.18	0.03				
Interpersonal Justice	Stress	-0.18	-2.76	0.01	0.18	0.16	11.21	0.00
	Problem Focused Coping	0.19	2.67	0.01				
	Social Support Seeking Coping	0.25	3.65	0.00				
	Emotion Focused Coping	-0.14	-2.1	0.04				

and coping mechanisms of problem-focused, emotion-focused and social support-seeking on overall perceptions of justice were examined. The results of the study have showed that work stress negatively effects overall justice perceptions of the employees. The findings of the current study are consistent with Zhang et al.'s (2014) study, which examined work stressors as predictors of organizational justice and strain. They found that both challenge and hindrance stressors are negatively and significantly related with organizational justice perceptions. As Fujishiro and Heaney (2007) proposed, justice appraisals and stress appraisals can be problematic to distinguish and are highly likely to influence one another. For instance, 'Once a situation has been appraised for stress, the stress appraisal itself may be appraised for justice by asking the question, "Do I deserve this much stress?"' Therefore, work stress can also effect the justice perception of the employees in a negative way (Fujishiro and Heaney 2007, 491). Also, problem-focused and social support-seeking coping mechanisms were found to be positively related with overall justice perception, while emotion-focused coping mechanism did not significantly affect justice perceptions.

Moreover, sub-dimensions of organizational justice were investigated in order to examine the separate components of the work environment. All sub-dimensions of organizational justice were negatively affected by work stress. As for coping dimensions, procedural and informational justice perceptions were found to be positively affected by problem-focused and social support-seeking coping mechanisms; while emotion-focused coping mechanism was not significantly related, again. These results are partly consistent with Nakagawa et al.'s (2014) research which postulated that problem-focused coping strategies have positive effects, while negative emotion-focused coping strategies have adverse effects on procedural justice perception. Also, contrary to the current study, seeking for social support as a coping strategy had no significant effect on the formation of procedural and interactional justice perceptions in the same study (Nakagawa et al. 2014). Resulting differences for the same constructs might have occurred due to cultural differences between the samples; even Japanese and Turkish cultures have some similar behavioural patterns. Another study conducted on a Western sample also provided results contradicting with this study. Lilly and Vrick's (2013) research showed that there is no significant relationship between avoidance or emotion-focused coping style and informational and interpersonal justice perceptions, while this study found a negative relationship between them.

Since informational justice is about being informed about certain situations in the workplace context and procedural justice is mostly related with the consistency and fairness of processes (Colquitt et al. 2001), trying to find a solution for a stressful event and getting the needed information for this stressful event from a co-worker or manager as a social support can be vital to consider the work environment as fair. In this study, interactional justice was touched upon along with its sub dimensions and analysed with other constructs separately. As a consequence, the results obtained from the current study suggested some different outcomes when compared to previous studies. It is important to assess the relationship of coping strategies and interactional justice dimensions in different organizational contexts, which have different levels of information flows or supervisory styles.

Apart from these dimensions, distributive justice perception was positively affected by social support-seeking coping mechanism, while emotion-focused and problem-focused coping mechanisms were not significantly related. Again, problem-focused and social support-seeking coping mechanisms were positively related with interpersonal justice perception; however, emotion-focused coping mechanism significantly and negatively affected this dimension. In parallel with the underlying mechanisms of informational justice perception, a supportive and explicative organizational context may reinforce interpersonal interactions and relationships. According to these results, work stress is highly effective on individuals' justice perceptions whatever the coping mechanism they use. Problem-focused and social support-seeking coping mechanisms were generally found to positively affect the overall justice and sub-dimensions of justice perceptions. Emotion-focused coping especially showed a different pattern in diverging sub-dimensions. Since it basically refers to avoidance and ignorance of the stressful situations, it may not be surprising that it has no significant or in some cases negative relationships with some of the organizational justice dimensions. Avoiding from the current problems may not influence an individual's perception of organizational justice, or avoidance may make the situation worse; but not better.

Moreover, the current study may help to provide better understanding about the reverse relationships of work stress and organizational justice constructs. Studies on work stress and organizational justice mostly assume that justice is the antecedent of stress, while the reverse might as well be true. It is conceivable that arranging variables such as dependent and independent for strict cause-and-

effect relationships may inhibit comprehension of the overall relationship network of organizational and behavioural constructs in organizational behaviour literature, as similar studies have suggested (Lilly and Vrick 2013; Nakagawa et al. 2014).

The study is not without limits. In the best-case scenario, stress and coping mechanisms explain only 18% of organizational justice perception. Thus, there are more variables than only stress and coping mechanisms in explaining justice perception of employees. Work environment characteristics can be more elaborately examined, and additional variables such as organizational culture/climate, ethical conduct in the workplace, and helping behaviour in organizational citizenship construct might be used to better understand organizational justice. Since justice is all about perceptions, emotions and affects can be added to the model as a moderator as well, in future research. Furthermore, the current research was a cross-sectional study that can only project limited perceptions and behaviours of employees. Longitudinal studies in different samples and environmental contexts may be more helpful in understanding the nature of reversed relationships among work stress, coping mechanisms and organizational justice perceptions.

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