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THE INFLUENCES OF PERCEIVED JUSTICE IN SCHOOL ON PRODUCTIVE AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR IN A SCHOOL SETTING

Objective and problem. Based on the theories and findings of organisational fairness, we will investigate how the perceived justice and injustice of the behaviour of teachers and co-pupils in school affect productive behaviour in school (willingness to work, commitment to school, performance, willingness to help), counterproductive behaviour (disruption, bullying, vandalism), injustice sensitivity and the well being of pupils.

Theoretical background. Justice is an important human motive. People want to be treated fairly. They want to get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Lerner & Montada, 1998). The theories of organisational fairness assume that organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB; identification with a company, sense of responsibility, commitment) is primarily influenced by perceived justice in the workplace (Folger & Coprazano, 1998; Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005). They differentiate between distributive justice (distribution of gratifications of all kinds), procedural justice (rules of reaching a decision) and interactional justice (treatment by superiors) (Colquitt, 2001). It has been proven that all three forms of justice promote OCB. Inversely, unfair treatment in the workplace can give rise to counterproductive work behaviour (CWB). Employees who feel that they are being treated unfairly are not only less committed to the company. They may also retaliate by carrying out acts of sabotage or theft or by deliberately being absent at times when the workload is particularly high (Furnham & Siegel, 2012; Greenberg, 1990). Injustice in the workplace ultimately damages emotional well being (Schmitt & Dörfel, 1999) and physical health (Siegrist, 2002).

So far these findings have only been transferred to school settings to a limited extent. This is surprising given that justice plays a major role in schools (fairness of tests, transparency of grading criteria, equal treatment of learners by teachers, fair treatment by co-pupils). Although there are differences between company and school settings, from the point of view of justice psychology, many characteristics of the two settings are similar. The superior in the workplace is the equivalent of the teacher in school; a work colleague is the equivalent of a co-pupil. In both systems, decisions are made that can have both desired and undesired consequences for the person concerned (employee; pupil). These include material and symbolic gratifications in the workplace and academic assessments in school. Indeed, both systems are shaped by sociometrically defined preference structures between and within hierarchies. Based on the theories and findings of organisational fairness, we therefore expect the perceived justice of the behaviour of teachers and co-pupils to favour productive behaviour in school (willingness to work, commitment to school, performance, willingness to help), while perceived injustice is more likely to give rise to counterproductive behaviour (disruption, bullying, vandalism) and to compromise the well being of the pupil. We will investigate these assumptions empirically. Furthermore, based on the theories of social information processing, we expect injustice sensitivity to favour the perception of injustice in a school setting and injustice insensitivity to increase when a person observes or experiences injustice (Baumert, Gollwitzer, Staubach & Schmitt, 2011; Baumert, Otto, Thomas, Bobocel & Schmitt, 2012; Baumert & Schmitt, 2009).

These hypotheses can be verified using various research strategies: (a) quasi-experimental intervention strategies, (b) classic longitudinal studies with measurements at intervals of several months after starting school and (c) high-frequency long-term studies implementing ambulatory assessment. The first method involves distributing tasks with varying degrees of appeal to learning stations (Pretsch et al. in press). This intervention enables us to induce perceptions of procedural and distributive justice in an authentic classroom setting in a controlled manner and, as distributions of this kind are inevitable, in a manner that is ethically acceptable. The second and third methods concentrate on situations in which the teacher pays attention to a pupil or not, praises or reprimands a pupil, assesses academic performance as well as on the cooperative and uncooperative behaviour of co-pupils in the natural course of a lesson. Retrospective evaluations of the justice of such situations and the resulting reactions can be promptly captured by means of ambulatory assessment. In addition, systematic observation and rating instruments developed in the previous project can be used to capture multiple perspectives of justice-related behaviours. The expected long-term consequences of repeated experiences of justice and injustice, in particular changes in well being and injustice sensitivity, can be determined using a pre-post design and questionnaire. Pre-measurements of injustice sensitivity can be used to verify hypotheses derived from applying theories of social information processing to the processing of justice-related information (Baumert & Schmitt, 2009; Baumert et al., 2011, 2012).

Relevance. Teaching research has largely concentrated on cognitive processes such as the acquisition of knowledge and skills to date. Scientists are also increasingly turning their attention to motivational and socio-emotional learning and performance factors. However, there have been only very few studies that have investigated the effect of experiencing justice on learning and performance (Dalbert, 2000; Maes, 1999). These studies have provided initial indications that belief in a fair world might be important for the learning behaviour of pupils. By building on the questions investigated in past projects and taking into consideration research into organisational fairness, we hope to generate findings that make a fundamental contribution to science and can be used to help optimise teaching processes.

Methodological approach. Justice-related occurrences will be produced in controlled settings in schools or used as an incidental event sample to capture the subjective experience of justice and the resulting short- and long-term pedagogically productive and counterproductive reactions. In addition to capturing subjective justice experiences, data can also be obtained from systematic observations of behaviour during lessons. The data will therefore be collected using a questionnaire as well as through ambulatory assessment technologies and systematic observations. Multivariate growth and latent true-change analyses will be performed on the data.

Possible dissertation topic

Influences of perceived justice in school on productive and counterproductive behaviour in a school setting. (The topic can be treated from both a theoretical and methodological point of view).

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