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Organizational injustice: Third parties' reactions to mistreatment of employee

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Abstract

Background: Research on organizational injustice has mainly focused on the victim's perspective. This study attempts to contribute to our understanding of third parties' perspective by empirically testing a model that describes third party reactions to mistreatment of employees. **Method:** Data were obtained from a sample (N = 334) of Spanish employees from various organizations, nested into 66 work-groups, via a survey regarding their perceptions of organizational mistreatment. Structural equation modeling was used to analyze the data. **Results:** The proposed model had a limited fit to the data and it was re-specified. Organizational mistreatment, employee performance, and employee organizational commitment explained internal attributions blaming the organization. Moreover, coworkers' organizational identification showed a positive impact on external attributions of responsibility. Lastly, supportive organizational climate and internal attributions accounted for a large percentage of variance in coworkers' perceptions of organizational unfairness. **Conclusions:** The final model explains the perceptions of injustice on the basis of internal attributions of responsibility in the face of organizational mistreatment of employees.

Keywords: Organizational justice; organizational mistreatment; third party; causal attributions; organizational identification.

Resumen

Injusticia organizacional: reacciones de las terceras partes ante el maltrato al empleado. **Antecedentes:** la investigación sobre la justicia organizacional se ha centrado en la perspectiva de la víctima. En este estudio intenta contribuir en la comprensión de la perspectiva de las terceras partes comprobando empíricamente un modelo que describe las reacciones de la tercera parte ante el maltrato de los empleados. **Método:** los datos fueron obtenidos de una muestra (N= 334) de empleados españoles de diversas organizaciones, incluidos en 66 grupos de trabajo, a través de una encuesta relativa a sus percepciones maltrato organizacional. Se usó el modelado de ecuaciones estructurales para analizar los datos. **Resultados:** el modelo propuesto tuvo un ajuste limitado a los datos y fue re-especificado. El maltrato organizacional, el rendimiento del empleado y el compromiso organizacional explicaban las atribuciones culpando a la organización. Más aún, la identificación organizacional del observador influía positivamente sobre la atribución de responsabilidad hacia fuera de la organización. Además el clima organizacional de apoyo y las atribuciones internas daban cuenta de un importante porcentaje de la varianza en las percepciones de los compañeros sobre la injusticia organizacional. **Conclusiones:** el modelo final explica las percepciones de injusticia a través de las atribuciones internas de responsabilidad en relación con el maltrato organizacional a los empleados.

Palabras clave: injusticia organizacional; maltrato organizacional; atribuciones causales; tercera parte; identificación organizacional.

Theoretical and empirical works on organizational justice have generally focused on the dyadic employee-employer relation analyzing the way employees react to mistreatment by the organization or its representatives. But employee mistreatment can also generate reactions in the people outside of the dyad (coworkers, clients, stakeholders, judges, and general public), which become the *third parties* in the face of the event of the worker's mistreatment and they end up reacting to organizational injustice.

The term third party designates the people who eventually form an impression of organizational injustice, on the basis of direct or vicarious experience of an event. They are aware of the mistreatment undergone by the employee and this knowledge triggers a series of cognitive and emotional reactions in them (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). These reactions are very important for organizations because of the increasing attention they pay to their image as socially responsible actors, which has an impact on their clients' purchases, their investors' support, and on the medium- and long-term results of the firm (Leung, Chiu, & Au, 1993). In addition, these vicarious experiences of mistreatment are important, because they could have a negative impact on the personal well-being of third parties (Low, Schneider, Radhakrishnan, & Rounds, 2007).

Theoretical reflection suggests that there are diverse factors that influence the reactions of third parties to organizational injustice (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). Among others, the most noteworthy are features of the event, victim's traits, observer characteristics', and organizational environment features (Cremer & Van Hiel, 2006).

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As a result, third parties will formulate attributions of responsibility for the fact, either blaming the organization or exonerating it, to end up reacting to organizational injustice (Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001).

This study attempts to contribute to our understanding of third parties' reactions by developing a set of hypotheses to empirically test the Skarlicki and Kulik's model (2004) of third party reactions to mistreatment of employee. However, due to the complexity of the model, in this paper we will concentrate on some characteristics of victims and third parties as antecedents of the attribution of responsibility, which in turn leads to perceived organizational justice. Regarding victim's characteristics, we will focus on job performance and organizational commitment. As a third party's important factor, we will analyze the effect of organizational identification on the attribution of responsibility. Lastly, in relation to environmental features, we will consider the impact of the organizational support climate on the perception of organizational injustice.

Who are third parties in organizational injustice?

Organizational justice has been studied profusely (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001), but third parties' perception has received very little attention. In all the situations that involve an unjust act, three parts can be identified: who makes the decision or carries out the action, who is the recipient of the action—the victim—and who contemplates the situation—that is, the third party. In this study, we focused on coworkers of a victim of organizational mistreatment, considered as work team colleagues.

The role of justice, or its absence, is very important for organizations because determines the attitudes, decisions, and behaviors of people at work and even outside of the workplace (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). Job satisfaction and organizational commitment are partially affected by perceptions of fair treatment (Brockner, Spreitzer, Mishra, Hochwarter, Pepper, & Weinberg, 2004). There is also evidence that organizational citizenship behavior and antisocial behavior (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997) are substantially related to perceptions of organizational injustice. Moreover, the observation of workplace discrimination or violence might even damage third parties' well-being (Low et al., 2007).

The actions and decisions of the organization— or of whoever acts in its name— that mistreats its employees can also produce reactions in other people who are not the direct victims of the situation. Research has showed that third parties evaluate the justice of massive layoffs and they react to the firm's treatment of the employees (Brockner et al., 2004; Cropanzano et al., 2001). The perception of organizational mistreatment would influence decision to buy products, participate in selection processes, and sympathy and support earned by the organization (Leung et al., 1993).

Therefore, the third party's perspective is gaining importance for several reasons (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). First, for each victim of organizational mistreatment, the number of possible observers or third parties can grow exponentially. Second, these third parties can affect the employees' decisions to react to the mistreatment of which they were the target, offering support if they decide to protest or simply listening to their complaints. Third, if they are members of the same organization, third parties learn vicariously about the treatment they might expect, which will affect their job attitudes. Even if third parties are not members of the organization, they can have a considerable impact on it because, as potential clients, stakeholders, or investors, third parties allocate resources across organizations.

How will third parties react to employee mistreatment?

Organizational mistreatment is a complex phenomenon that stems from interpersonal interactions and organizational practices. Harlos and Pinder (1999) conducted a qualitative study of employees who reported having been unjustly treated and found that organizational mistreatment involves interactional injustice, perceived interpersonal mistreatment by a hierarchical superior, and systemic injustice, perceptions of unfairness involving the larger organizational context within which work relationships are enacted. Furthermore, Harlos and Axelrod (2005) examined mistreatment in the workplace experienced by hospital employees and found three dimensions of mistreatment – verbal abuse, work obstruction and emotional neglect – that were associated with diminished employees' well-being, work satisfaction and organizational commitment, along with stronger intent to leave.

According to the literature, third parties react to organizational injustice like the victim, but less intensely (Folger & Skarlicki, 1997). However, research on the actor-observer differences (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Malle, 2006) has shown that our appraisals of a situation differ considerably depending on whether we are actors or observers. Due to this cognitive phenomenon, third parties are more willing to blame the victim for the mistreatment than the victim will be to blame him or herself (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). In addition, third parties may perceive the situation differently from the victims because their information about the facts is second-hand. In this sense, their perceptions may be influenced by the victim's account, the organizational agent's explanation, and the interpretation of other third parties. Therefore, third parties will have a characteristic view of the situation of organizational injustice, which does not necessarily coincide with that of the victim.

In order to understand third parties' organizational justice perceptions, there is a need to consider the mediators and moderatos that determine them. Figure 1 presents Skarlicki and Kulik's (2004) model of third party reactions to employee mistreatment. The model begins with identifying the factors that can affect a third party's perceptions of negative impact, which trigger assessments regarding attributions of responsibility.

When people have to assess a fact as just or unjust, they compare it with other possible alternatives, imagining the way the situation should have evolved (Folger & Skarlicki, 1997). Here, the third party looks for an answer to the following essential question: *Could the organization that causes the injustice have acted otherwise?* If it could have, but chose this action deliberately, there will be an attribution of internal responsibility. If, in contrast, factors out of control of the organization prevented it from acting otherwise, there will be an attribution of external responsibility (Weiner, 1989). In this sense, people perceive more injustice when they believe that the alternative situations would have made the victim feel better. The worse mistreatment they witness, the easier it is to imagine a better alternative and, therefore, more organizational injustice is perceived (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. The higher the organizational mistreatment perception, the more likely coworkers will attribute internal responsibility and the less likely they will attribute external responsibility.

There is a broad array of factors that affect the attribution of organizational responsibility, among which is the victim's characteristics and the third party's characteristics. With regard to the former, it is less likely for the organization to be considered responsible if the third party thinks that the victim somehow deserved the treatment received. If, in the spectators' opinion, the victims infringed the rules, showed little commitment or lack of respect to authority, or even if their performance was low, then they are more likely to be held responsible for provoking the behavior that ends up harming them (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). In the situation considered herein, the coworkers share task development and have first-hand information about the victim's job performance, thus forming an impression about his/her production and organizational commitment.

Hypothesis 2. The higher the victims' occupational performance, the more likely coworkers will blame the organization for the injustice - internal attribution- and the less likely they will attribute this responsibility externally.

Hypothesis 3. The higher the victims' organizational commitment, the more likely coworkers will blame the organization for the injustice and the less likely they will attribute this responsibility externally.

With regard to the third parties' characteristics that will affect their decision about the fact witnessed, their bond with the organization to which they all belong deserves special attention. This bond is usually called organizational identification and it is defined as the "perception of oneness with or belongingness to the organization" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 34). Organizational identification implies that employees have linked their organizational membership to their self-concepts, either cognitively (e.g. internalizing organizational values), emotionally (e.g. pride in being part of the organization), or both. According to Skarlicki and Kulik (2004), the more that a third party identifies with the organization, the less likely he or she will attribute responsibility for a mistreatment to the organization.

Hypothesis 4. The higher coworkers' organizational identification, the less likely coworkers will attribute responsibility to the organization— internal attribution— and the more likely they will exonerate the firm from blame—attribution to external causes.

At the heart of the model are the third party's perceptions of organizational injustice. When assigning responsibility to the organization, third parties are more likely than victims to take into account the broader social context and the behavior of other parties in the mistreatment (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). Injustice perceptions are likely to be resilient when third parties consider that the organization could and should have treated the employee otherwise. This activation process locates attributions as a mediator in the relationship between the mistreatment to employee and organizational injustice perceptions.

Hypothesis 5. Attributions of internal responsibility to the organization will positively affect coworkers' perception of organizational injustice in the face of an organizational mistreatment to employees (H5a), whereas the attributions of external responsibility will have a negative effect (H5b).

In addition, there are a series of organizational factors that could affect both the third parties' decision to classify the situation as unfair and also their subsequent reaction to it. The third parties consider the organizational climate and procedures if they file a complaint of injustice (Miceli & Near, 1992). Some organizations have express deontological codes that emphasize personal responsibility in the face of unfair procedures. A supportive organizational clime includes concepts such as participation,

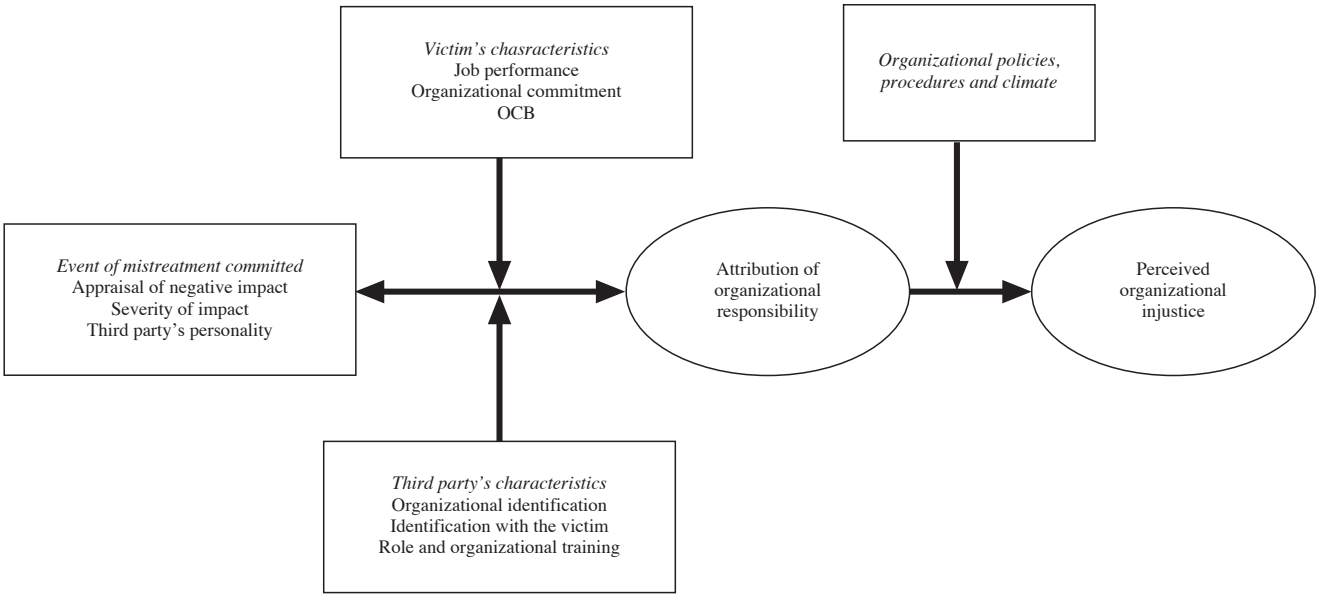

Figure 1. *Theoretical model of the third party's reactions to organizational mistreatment (Skarlicki & Kulick, 2004)*

cooperation, mutual trust, team spirit, or personal growth (Mañas, González-Romá, & Peiró, 1999). Therefore, organizations with more supportive climates enhance employee perceptions of organizational support and justice.

Hypothesis 6. The higher supportive organizational climate, the less likely coworkers will perceive organizational injustice.

Based on the literature reviewed to this point, a resulting theoretical model that includes the above mentioned set of hypotheses is depicted in Figure 2.

Method

Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 334 employees (52.4% women). To avoid a possible bias in the results due to the use of a single kind of organization, the sample was made up of 66 work groups. In this context, a work group consisted in two or more interdependent individuals who interact with and influence one another in order to accomplish a common purpose. Regarding of type of organization, 54.9% worked in the Public Administration, 40.9% worked in private firms, and 4.1% belonged to other categories. Of the organizations, 73% were large firms, and only 17.7% were small and medium sized firms, and 8.7% were micro-firms. The mean age of the participants was 35.5 years (*SD*= 9.8) and the mean time employed by the organization was 9.9 years (*SD*= 9.2), whereas the mean time in the work group was 6.3 years (*SD*= 6.9). Out of the total sample, 55 % of the participants had university studies, 39% had studied Professional Training or high school, and 6% had only completed Compulsory Secondary Education or its equivalent. Of them, 48.6% were directors of firms or of the Public Administration, professionals or medium-level technicians, 37.9% were office employees and commercial service employees, and the remaining 13.4% were journeymen, mechanical operators, etc.

The study was carried out in Spain. Questionnaires were distributed in work centers by collaborators of the research team, who performed the task after having received precise instructions in order to homogenize the administration procedure. The participants were informed of the goal of the study, of the anonymity of the data collected, and they expressed their consent verbally, after which they completed a workbook containing the diverse scales of the study.

Measures

As the questionnaire was meant to collect the participants' perceptions of a coworker's experience, we gave the following instructions: *Organizations frequently mistreat their employees. When answering the following questions, please THINK OF A COWORKER who was the victim of such treatment by the firm/ organization*. The variables were all measured at the individual level

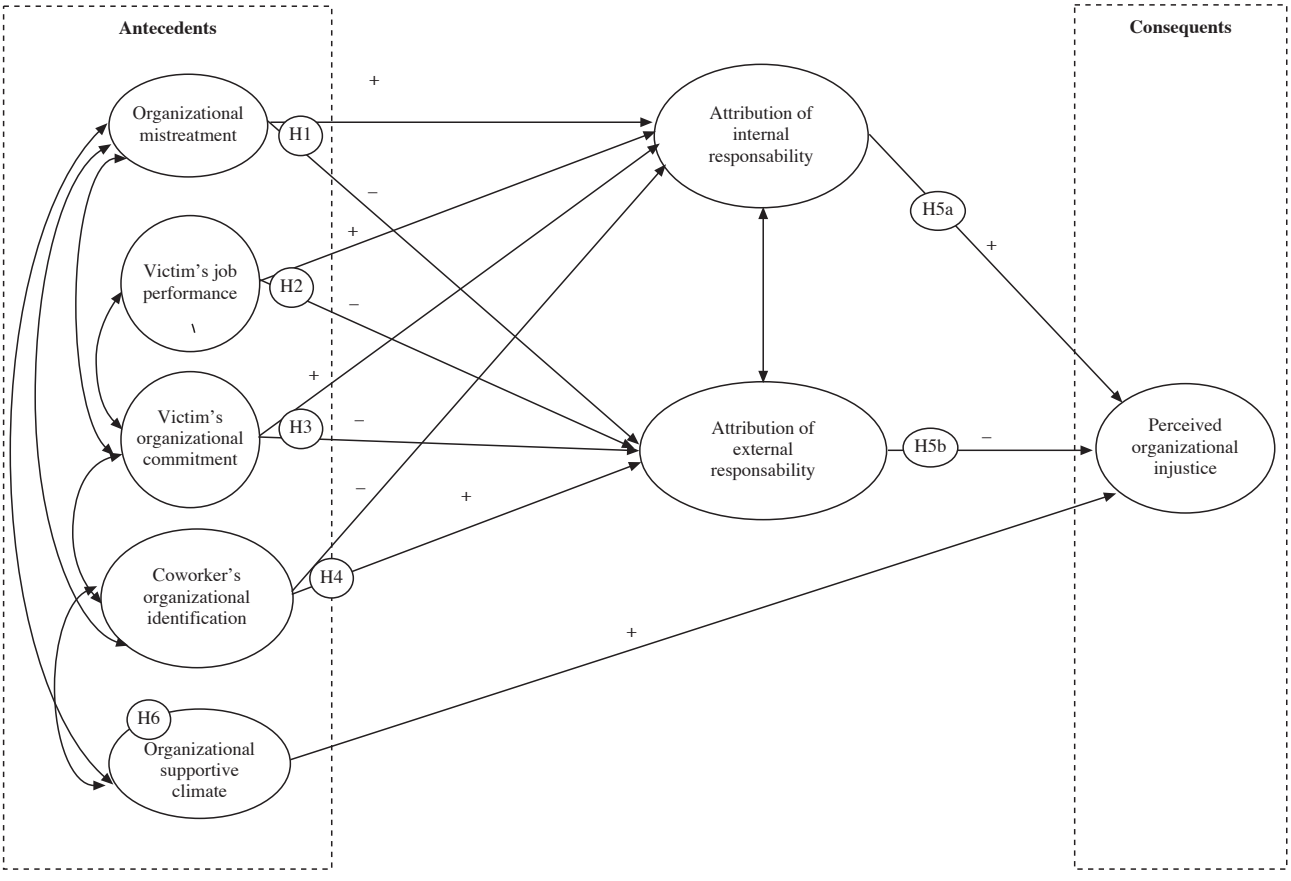

Figure 2. *Initial hypothesized model*

of analysis as multi-item constructs on seven-point Likert scales, with anchors from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Organizational mistreatment of employees. We used two subscales from Harlos and Axerold's (2005) questionnaire: Work Obstruction and Emotional Negligence. Work Obstruction subscale has four items referring to the denial of personal support or organizational resources needed for networking and performing work effectively. Emotional Negligence subscale includes five items about how the organization undermines the employees by ignoring their needs and grudging support, recognition, and resources. Examples of items are: "*Your coworker... would say that the organization ignores his/her requests for information" and "...would say that the organization tells him/her that his/her work contributions are worthless"*. Reliability analysis revealed satisfactory internal consistency (α= .88).

Victims' job performance. It was rated with two items specifically developed for this study: "*Your coworker performs adequately at work"* and *"Your coworker's performance is similar to that of any other coworker"*. The correlation between these items was very high (*r*= .89).

Victims' organizational commitment. We used the Affective Commitment seven-item scale of Meyer and Allen (1991). Examples of items are: "*Your coworker... does not feel at home in this organization"* and *"...does not feel like an integrant part of the organization* (reversed)". The analysis of internal consistency of the scale showed satisfactory reliability (α= .86).

Coworkers' Organizational Identification. To assess this variable, we used a Spanish translation (Topa, Moriano, & Morales, 2009) of Mael and Ashforth's (1992) six-item scale (e.g., "*when I talk about this organization, I usually say "we" rather than "they"*), which is one of the most widely used measure of identification with the organization. Reliability analysis showed satisfactory result (α= .89).

Attribution of organizational responsibility. Respondents were asked to think about instances when their organization had failed to fulfill promises to employees, and to then three possible attributions were presented (Topa et al., 2009): 1) "There was an honest misunderstanding between your coworker and the organization regarding what the organization would provide", 2) "The organization could have kept its promise, but it chose not to", and 3) "A situation beyond the organization's control made it impossible for the organization to keep its promise". The attribution of internal responsibility to the organization was obtained from the second item, whereas attribution of external responsibility was obtained by the average of items 1 and 3.

Organizational Supportive Climate. We used the Spanish version of the questionnaire FOCUS-93 (Mañas et al., 1999), specifically, the Supportive Climate subscale. Examples of items are: "*How many people who have committed an error have had a second chance?"* and *"How often do the directors express their concern for the employees' personal problems?*. Reliability analysis revealed an acceptable internal consistency (α= .71).

Perceived organizational injustice. We employed a Spanish version of the Fair Interpersonal Treatment Scale (Donovan, Drasgow, & Munson, 1998). The scale has 10 items and the global measure was reversed in order to assess perceived organizational injustice. Examples of items are: "*The employees are treated fairly by the bosses"* and *"Everyone is treated as an equal"*. Reliability analysis showed satisfactory result (α= .89).

Data analysis

We applied structural equation modeling techniques to test our hypotheses, using the maximum likelihood procedure and the matrix of the original data as the input. The model shown in Figure 2 has five latent exogenous variables and three latent endogenous variables. Each variable has an observable indicator made up of the mean of the corresponding scale.

The goodness-of-fit of the models was evaluated using relative and absolute indices as recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999). The absolute goodness-of-fit indices calculated were the chi-square goodness-of-fit index, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), and the Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI). The relative goodness-of-fit index computed was the comparative fit index (CFI).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix are shown in Table 1. They show provisional support for the hypotheses. Victims' organizational commitment is positively related to the attribution of internal responsibility (*r*= .40, *p*<.01) and to the perception of organizational injustice (*r*= .36, *p*<.01), whereas victims ' job performance is negatively related to external attribution (*r*= -.13, *p*<.01). On the contrary, the higher the coworkers' organizational identification, the lower their perception of mistreatment suffered by the victim (*r*= -.20, *p*<.01) and the perceived organizational injustice (*r*= -.57, *p*<.01), but the higher external attributions of responsibility (*r*= -.29, *p*<.01). In the same sense, the supportive

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for all variables (N= 334)

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Organizational mistreatment	4.96	1.61	–	.06	.44**	-.20**	-.12*	.60**	-.33**	.28**
2. Victim's job performance	3.99	1.22		–	.25**	.02	.02	.08	-.13**	-.02
3. Victim's organizational commitment	5.69	1.25			–	-.43**	.20**	.40**	-.33**	.36**
4. Coworker's organizational identification	4.79	1.23				–	.44**	-.20**	.29**	-.57**
5. Supportive organizational climate	4.17	0.98					–	-.11*	.19**	-.60**
6. Attribution of internal responsibility	4.43	1.71						–	-.36**	.28**
7. Attribution of external responsibility	3.30	1.68							–	-.26**
8. Perceived organizational injustice	3.61	1.19								–

Note: ** *p*<.01; * *p*<.05

organizational climate is negatively related to the perceived organizational injustice (r= -.60, p<.01).

The hypothesized model fitted the empirical data poorly ($\chi^2(9)$= 60.98, p<.001, GFI= .95, AGFI= .78, CFI= .92, RMSEA= .153) because the RMSEA was > .0.8 and the AGFI was < 0.9. Thus, we re-specified the model post hoc based on modification indices. A direct relation between the participant's organizational identification and their perception of organizational injustice was included, which improved the fit of the model to the data ($\chi^2(18)$= 7.92, p<.542, GFI= .99, AGFI= .98, CFI= .99, RMSEA= .000). The relation between external attribution and organizational injustice was non-significant, but it was nevertheless retained because it is relevant from the theoretical viewpoint. The standardized estimations of the final model support most of the hypotheses (see Figure 3).

It is important to underline that participants' organizational identification was the only positive predictor of external attributions (β= .17, p<.01) and it had a negative impact on perceived organizational injustice (β= -.35, p<.01). The total amount of explained variance of perceived injustice was high (50%), although the model explained internal attributions (39%) better than external attributions (21%).

Discussion and conclusions

The current study contributes to the literature by testing Skarlicki and Kulik's (2004) model of third parties' perceptions of organizational injustice with a large and heterogeneous sample. We found empirical support for the hypotheses in a sample of employees belonging to 66 different work groups, whereas previous research had focused the analysis of very concrete situations such as third parties' support for strikers (Kelloway, Francis, Catano, & Dupré, 2008). The final model explains reasonably well the perceptions of injustice on the basis of internal attributions of responsibility in the face of organizational mistreatment of employees. The predictors of this model - organizational mistreatment and the victims' affective commitment to the firm - account for third parties' attributions of organizational responsibility. This evidence seems coherent with the deontic model of justice (Cropanzano, Goldman, & Folger, 2005), which proposes that third parties, although not directly affected by mistreatment, will nevertheless experience intense negative emotions as a result of a visceral reaction to the violation of normative standards of moral or social behavior.

This study also contributes evidence on the positive influence of the third party's organizational identification on the attribution of external responsibility in the face of mistreatment to employee, and the negative influence on the perception of organizational injustice. Thus, we verified the predictions of Skarlicki and Kulik's (2004) model about the fact that the observers' characteristics and, specifically, their relation with the organization will affect their attributions about the observed events.

The direct and negative influence of the third party's organizational identification on the perception of injustice deserves more detailed attention. Previous research support has suggested

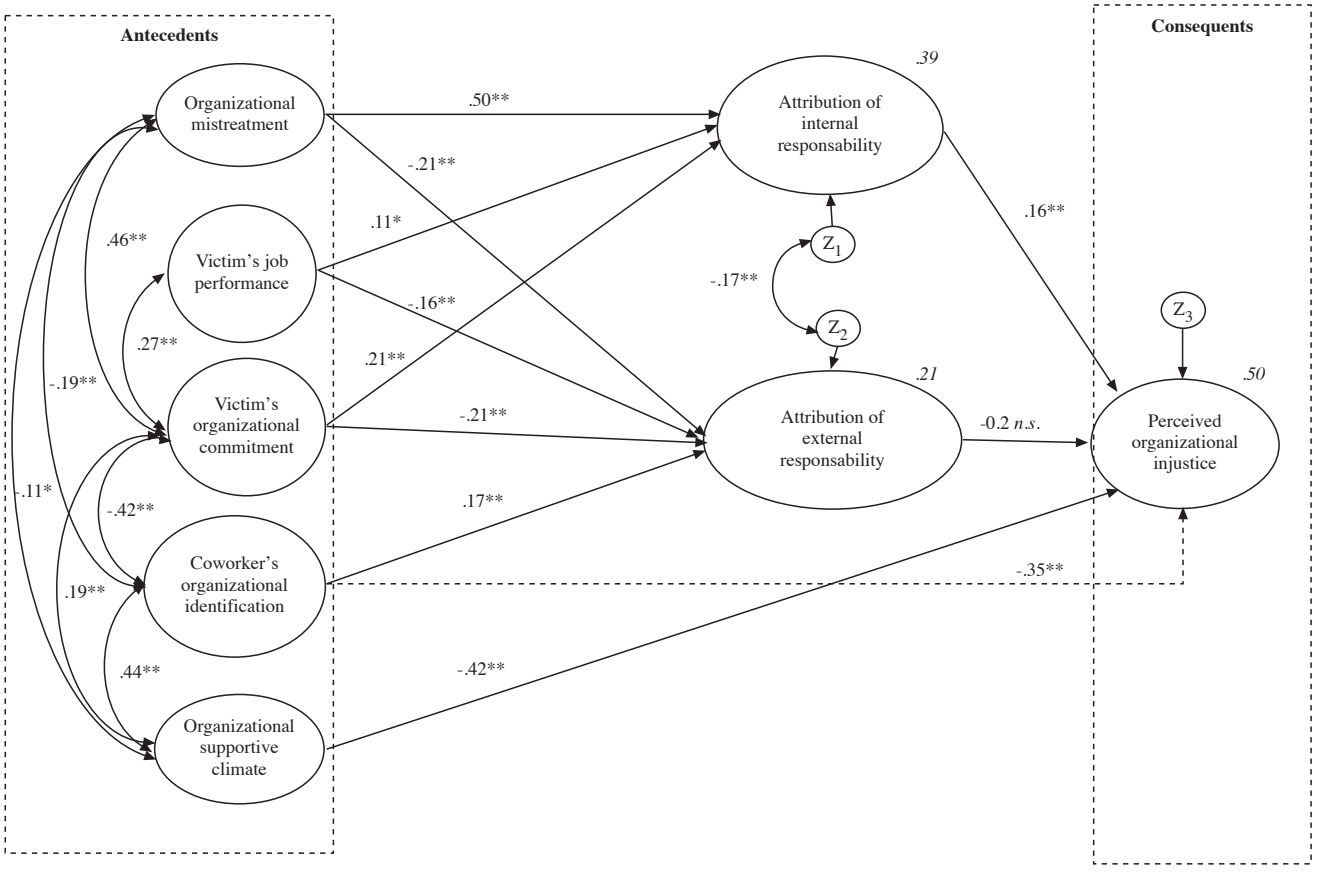

***Figure 3**. Standardized estimations of the re-specified model.*
*Note: ** p<.01; * p<.05; ns= non-significant*

that organizational identification is related to the concern for fair treatment in at least two senses (Clayton & Opotow, 2003). First, as justice is a system of rules backed by an organization, people who identify more with that organization will also be more motivated to adhere to this system of rules in order to protect their organizational identity. However, identification also affects the concrete definitions of what is considered just in a certain situation. When organizational identification is strong, the criteria of distribution of resources that are chosen may be those that benefit or more clearly legitimize the coworkers. Thus, what is perceived as fair—or the amount of attention that is paid to certain justice-related behaviors—may depend on the extent to which one identifies with the organization. Second, people who do not identify with the firm are more likely to have instrumental concerns rather than relational concerns, whereas people who are more identified with the firm are more likely to place more emphasis on how they are treated by other members (Huo, Smith, Tyler, & Lind, 1996). This could be due to the fact that, as a consequence of shared identification, the other members of the organization will be included within the *justice sphere*. Whereas the inclusion of others in this sphere will ensure they are deserving of considerations of justice, their exclusion would imply the absence of positive tendencies towards them and the possibility of their being chosen as the target of exploitation or violence (Clayton & Opotow, 2003).

Recently, researchers have shown that identity influences individuals' reaction to justice failure such that individuals high in moral identity are more likely to affirm their moral domain than other domains. Zhu, Martens and Aquino (2012) demonstrated that, in face of an organizational justice failure, individuals who affirm their moral domain are (a) more likely to act morally and less likely to act immorally (b) more punitive towards others who violate social norms and (c) more supportive of corporate social responsibility programs. Summing up, identification with an organization determines who one thinks deserves fair treatment and, as a consequence, the higher one's organizational identification, the lower the likelihood of one's seeing its actions as unjust.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study has several limitations. As part of the research on third parties' perspective of injustice, this work is a methodological option in the assessment of observers' perceptions. As indicated by Skarlicki and Kulik (2004, p. 188), researchers should specify to the participants whether they want them to "imagine how the other person (the victim) feels" or whether they want them to "imagine how they would feel in the other person's place." These subtle differences of perspective seem to generate different emotional and motivational patterns. In the current study, we asked the participants to express their own perspective of the situation, they were never asked expressly to put themselves in the employee's situation. Although this is based on our interest in expressly obtaining the perspective of the observer not directly involved in the mistreatment, this kind of psychological distance taking probably leads to underestimating the negative impact on the employee of the mistreatment committed and, consequently, to downplaying the importance of the injustice.

Another limitation stems from the fact that we did not consider the performance of concrete action by the observers of the injustice. In this sense, the empirical support of the model should still be extended in the future to include variables that would affect the decision to act. This approach has been partially assumed by a prior above-mentioned study that analyzes support for strikers, and should be extended to include a broader range of organizational situations.

Concerning the size and representativeness of the sample, the limitations of this study are obvious, especially those due to the sampling procedure used. To this we must add that all the data proceed from self-reports, which can include a source of uncontrolled error from the common variance. Despite the great difficulty of gaining access to this type of sample, the study may contribute relevant information with a view to human resources management in organizations.

Although results confirm the general logic of Skarlicki and Kulik's (2004) model, there are several issues to be clarified in further studies. Among them is the possible negative impact on the observer of the vicarious experience of organizational mistreatment, which leads us to propose that the consequences of injustice are not limited to the victim-organization relation, but instead, they end up affecting the entire work group that surrounds the mistreated person. Results along these lines have already been contributed by recent studies (Low et al., 2007), but they were limited to considering events such as mobbing or gender or ethnic discrimination, whereas organizational mistreatment has not been analyzed as an event of organizational injustice. The role of emotions in perceptions of organizational injustice has not received sufficient attention from empirical research, nor was it clarified in our results because we did not take adequate measures of emotional reactions, either of the victim or of the observer. This is a line for future research, and some recent studies (Barclay, Skarlicki, & Pugh, 2005) show the mediating role of negative emotions in the relation between perceptions of injustice and behaviors of retaliation.

Another facet that has not received attention in our study is third parties' information processing and how this may affect the intensity of their emotional reactions. A recent study of Skarlicki and Rupp (2010) verifies the role of rational versus experiential processing in third parties' reactions, which are weaker when processing is rational. A similar aspect is the observer's prior beliefs concerning the integrity of the firm and its representatives, which was not specifically tested in this study. As seen in other work (Skarlicki et al., 2005), these beliefs may have an effect on perceptions of injustice in situations of layoffs, among others.

Implications for human resources management

In the economic crisis that we are living nowadays, most employees are afraid of losing their jobs. Under these circumstances, it may not be easy for them to react against organizational mistreatment. However, the mistreatment of employee is often observed directly and indirectly by a wide variety of others both inside and outside the organization, and these reactions are important to both employee well-being and the reputation of the firm. Previous research has shown that third parties can make justice judgments and react to the mistreatment of employee inside and outside the organization. In fact, the organizational mistreatment to employee predicts third parties' intentions to buy the firm's products and their sympathy and support for collective actions such as strikes and boycotts (Brockner et al., 2004; Cropanzano et al., 2001; Leung et al., 1993; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). Therefore, third parties can have a more lingering impact on organizations than do victims.

From a practical perspective, the best strategy to guarantee that third parties will not react to mistreatment is to avoid mistreatment in the first place. Organizations that train managers to be fair are likely to reduce adverse third parties' reactions. Training managers in principles of justice has been shown to increase organizational members' justice perceptions (Skarlicki & Latham, 2006). Nevertheless, third parties' reactions are based on perceptions and attributions of responsibility, and even fair treatment might not always appear fair for everyone. Thus, managers may need to attend to the perceptions of third parties even in the absence of any intention to mistreat employees (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). Our current results suggest that fostering employee organizational identification and a supportive climate would be useful to reduce third parties' injustice perception.

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