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Fairness matters: organisational justice in project contexts

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ABSTRACT

Organisational justice is an established construct in the context of permanent organisations and relates to perceptions of fairness in the working environment. Justice judgements are context specific and whilst prior research has shown the positive impact of fair treatment on organisations and employees, less is known about organisational justice in projects and the impacts of fair or unfair treatment of project team members. This paper sets out to explore these shortfalls through a qualitative multi-method study. Combining the diaries of ten project team members, with pre- and post-diary interviews, the paper presents dimensions (distributive, procedural and interactional) of organisational justice experienced in the project context, factors influencing project team members justice judgements (sources, timing, delegation, and reflection) and the impact of in-/justice on individuals (ways of working, health and wellbeing, relationships, feelings), projects (project delivery) and organisations (reputation, effectiveness of processes). Policy and practice recommendations are made.

Introduction

Charles J. Sykes often quoted first rule for life is that 'life is not fair - get used to it'. Is this a hard and fast rule in the workplace or are there alternatives to simply accepting that life is unfair in the working environment? Previous research on organisational justice in permanent organisations has established that the fair treatment of employees has a positive impact on the employees themselves and their organisations (Colquitt et al. 2013; Feng et al. 2023). However, we also know that justice judgements are context specific, and that the phenomenon is perceived differently in different social and organisational contexts (Colquitt and Jackson 2006). With projects being vehicles for change and an increased need for transformational change on an organisational and societal level to address grand challenges such as climate change, there is an increase in work being organised by projects. This spread of project organising is sometimes also referred to as 'projectification' or that we live and work in a 'project society' (Lundin et al. 2015; Lundin 2016). However, it has been recognised that some fundamental concepts of projects as temporary organisations are different to permanent organisation (Lundin and Söderholm 1995). This means that projects provide a different social and organisational context for fairness perceptions and it is unclear how this context influences these perceptions. Generally speaking, the perception of fairness in the working environment is known as organisational justice (Colquitt, Greenberg, et al. 2005). More specifically, organisational justice is defined as 'the extent to which an aspect of the

organizational environment is perceived as fair, according to a certain rule or standard' (Moliner et al. 2017, 1; Cropanzano et al. 2001).

Despite the need to better understand behavioural aspects in projects (Unterhitzenberger 2021), limited research on organisational justice in the project context has been undertaken. Current work suggests that it positively influences the performance of projects (Unterhitzenberger and Bryde 2019), but a more in depth understanding of how justice perceptions are formed and how the duality of authority in the form of client/project manager and line manager influences these perceptions is missing. Also, so far, we have very limited understanding of the impact of organisational justice in project settings beyond project performance, i.e. impact on the individual, on project processes or on the permanent organisations associated with the project. Hence, with this paper, we aim to investigate how fair treatment is characterised in the context of projects and we developed the following research question: *How do project team members perceive organisational justice in projects and what are the impacts of fair or unfair treatment of project team members?*

We have conducted a qualitative multi-method study using diary method and interviews to get in depth and context specific insights into fairness perceptions of project team members and project managers. Prior research has established the benefits of organisational justice in permanent organisations. Projects differ from permanent organisations in respect to temporality, uncertainty and changing relationships (Lundin and Söderholm 1995). The contribution of the paper is to extend what is known about organisational

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justice in the project context. By learning about the justice rules project team members employ and how justice judgments are formed, the paper provides important contextual information on ways to support the fair treatment of project team members in intra and inter-organisation projects and by doing so it contributes towards a fairer working environment.

Theoretical background

Organisational justice is viewed as a phenomenon which is complex and multifaceted 'as individuals are concerned about fairness for several reasons, judge the fairness of several aspects of decision events, and use fairness perceptions to guide a wide range of key attitudes and behaviors' (Colquitt, Greenberg, et al. 2005, 45). Traditionally, it is divided into three dimensions (Colquitt, Greenberg, et al. 2005): 1) Distributive justice, which is concerned with the fair distribution of outcomes; 2) Procedural justice, which is concerned with the procedures which are used for decision making and 3) Interactional justice, which is concerned with the communication of outcomes and procedures.

Distributive justice

Distributive justice relates to the equitable, equal, and needs-based allocation of outcomes, rewards, and resources (Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007). Originally based on Adam's equity theory, equitable refers to the distribution of outcomes and rewards according to an individual's contribution (Adams 1965; Leventhal & Greenberg 1976). Equality and need have been recognised as influencers of fairness judgements (Colquitt et al. 2005). Distributive justice plays a role in the allocation of rewards such as benefits packages and pay (Schminke, Cropanzano, and Rupp 2002; Colquitt and Jackson 2006) as well as professional development and promotion opportunities (Schminke, Cropanzano, and Rupp 2002). When individuals make judgements about distributive fairness in these contexts, they take aspects such as effort and experience (Lim and Loosemore 2017; Yang et al. 2018) as well as responsibility and workload (Yang et al. 2018) into account. Distributive justice is also relevant in relation to the allocation of resources such as work schedules (Schminke, Cropanzano, and Rupp 2002; Sahoo and Sahoo 2019), workload and job responsibilities (Chih et al. 2017), appropriate equipment and support (Yang et al. 2018) and contracts and risks as it ensures that resources are adequate to enable individuals to work effectively (Lim and Loosemore 2017). An individual's perceptions of fair rewards (distributive justice) are influenced by judgements on procedural and interactional justice (Lim and Loosemore 2017).

Procedural justice

Procedural justice concerns practices (Sahoo and Sahoo 2019), policies and guidelines (Rupp and Cropanzano 2002), regulations and processes (Loosemore and Lim 2015), and procedures used for making decisions and determining outcomes. For procedures to be perceived as fair they should be (i) based on accurate and valid information, laws, facts, and opinions; (ii) be bias free, impartial, neutral, and non-discriminatory; (iii) be designed and applied consistently to all; (iv) should provide opportunities for procedures to be corrected, modified and for challenges/appeals; and (v) should not deceive and should be ethical and moral (Leventhal 1980; Colquitt and Jackson 2006; Dayan and Di Benedetto 2008). Fair procedures should also be (vi) representative of all views (Leventhal 1980) and (vii) support the speedy resolution of disputes (Loosemore and Lim 2015; Lim and Loosemore 2017). Moreover, fair procedures provide opportunities for people to express, and give voice to, their views, opinions, beliefs, and feelings, whilst also being able to input to, negotiate and influence decision outcomes (Thibaut and Walker 1975; Colquitt and Jackson 2006; Dayan and Di Benedetto 2008).

Interactional justice

Interactional justice focuses on the communication of outcomes and procedures (Bies and Moag 1986; Colquitt, Greenberg, et al. 2005). Furthermore, interactional justice relates to treatment at an individual level and comprises of interpersonal and informational justice (Colquitt 2001). Interpersonal justice relates to individual's perceptions of their treatment by sources of justice, for example, are they treated with politeness (Colquitt and Jackson 2006; Lim and Loosemore 2017), respect and dignity (Rupp and Cropanzano 2002; Colquitt and Jackson 2006; Dayan and Di Benedetto 2008; Rupp et al. 2014; Lim and Loosemore 2017), kindness and consideration (Dayan and Di Benedetto 2008). It also relates to whether individuals perceive they have freedom of expression and association (Lim and Loosemore 2017), that they feel they are valued, and held in high regard, by the sources of justice (Rupp and Cropanzano 2002).

Informational justice relates to individual's perceptions of how sources of justice communicate with them, for example, is the way information is communicated timely and truthful (Dayan and Di Benedetto 2008), honest (Colquitt and Jackson 2006) and open and transparent (Rupp and Cropanzano 2002; Lim and Loosemore 2017). It involves sources of justice consulting with individuals (Lim and Loosemore 2017), keeping individuals informed about decisions (Rupp and Cropanzano 2002; Lim and Loosemore 2017) and providing reasonable levels of information (Schminke, Cropanzano, and Rupp 2002; Lim and Loosemore 2017), explanations (Rupp and Cropanzano 2002; Colquitt and Jackson 2006; Dayan and Di Benedetto 2008; Rupp et al. 2014; Lim and Loosemore 2017) and justification for actions (Dayan and Di Benedetto 2008).

The negative impacts of injustices from other justice dimensions will be reduced if organisations are able to maintain high levels of the interactional justice dimension (Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007). Perceptions that sources of justice value the rights of individuals (Dayan and Di Benedetto 2008; Chih et al. 2017; Yang et al. 2018), can suppress personal biases (Dayan and Di Benedetto 2008) and

refrain from making improper remarks (Yang et al. 2018) are characteristics of interactional justice.

Influences on justice perceptions

Justice perceptions are 'in the eye of the beholder' (Colquitt et al. 2018, 159), i.e. inherently subjective, and in addition context specific (Colquitt and Jackson 2006). This means that there is no correct or incorrect perception of fairness, but that individuals make fairness judgements based on their life narrative themes, trait dispositions and context they operate in Colquitt et al. (2018). Hence, there are different aspects which influence how an individual perceives fairness. One of the most prominent influences identified in prior literature is the source of the treatment. Reactions to fair or unfair treatment are influenced by an individual's own predisposition to viewing sources as fair, referred to as their 'fairness propensity' (Colquitt et al. 2018) and judgements on the source of justice or injustice (Lavelle, Rupp, and Brockner 2007; Cojuharenco, Marques, and Patient 2017). So, in addition to individual's assessments of just rewards, procedures, communications, etc., fairness judgements are informed by perceptions on accountability for implementing justice rules, i.e. consideration on the sources of justice (Rupp and Cropanzano 2002; Rupp et al. 2014). Prior research has established organisations (for example, an individual's employer organisation) and individuals as sources of justice (Rupp and Cropanzano 2002; Rupp et al. 2014). Differentiating between organisations and individuals as sources of justice, Greenberg (2001) described how injustice emanating from an 'impersonal' organisation source (such as a procedural injustice) are potentially easier to tolerate than a personally felt injustice from an individual.

Often focussing on individual sources of justice with direct lines of authority, such as managers and supervisors (Rupp and Cropanzano 2002; Chih et al. 2017; Yang et al. 2018), prior studies have also considered, although to a lesser extent, co-workers, and customers (Rupp et al. 2014), in a health care context, patient family members (Harris, Lavelle, and McMahan 2020), in a service industry environment, banking customers (Rupp et al. 2008), manufacturing industry customers (Ahmed, Shafiq, and Mahmoodi 2022) and in a project context, clients/sponsors as justice sources (Unterhitzenberger and Bryde 2019).

Decision making in team contexts, such as agreeing group responsibilities and tasks, extends the concept of organisational justice in an interesting direction, that is workgroup or team members as sources of justice (Harris, Lavelle, and McMahan 2020) for example, in new product development teams (Dayan and Di Benedetto 2008) and construction project teams (Lim and Loosemore 2017; Unterhitzenberger and Bryde 2019).

Other influences on justice have been found to be temporal and spatial aspects. In a study of the role of organisational justice in job burnout, Yang et al. (2018) found that Chinese construction project managers held low-perceptions of spatial and temporal justice in the construction industry, moreover the findings linked exhaustion with both spatial injustice (for example, a lack of autonomy in decisions on work locations, poor physical working conditions, or extended periods working away from home) and temporal injustice (for example, long working hours exceeding routine working hours and negatively impacting on a worker's free or discretionary time). Prior research has explored the relationship of temporal aspects of organisational justice, such as frequency of exposure to injustice, to impacts (Butler and Chung-Yan 2011; Hayashi et al. 2019) and the role of anticipation of future experiences, recall of past experiences and present evaluation of treatment on reactions to justice (Ambrose and Cropanzano 2003). 'Dynamics' reflects the effect on justice judgement of past experiences, and frequency and patterns of treatment over time, and is one of Fortin et al. (2016) five 'temporal' aspects of justice events, perceptions and reactions. Fortin et al. (2016) remaining temporal characteristics of organisational justice related to 'duration' (for example the duration of prior experiences or justice reactions), 'timing' (for example, the timeliness of justice events or a delayed reaction to injustice), 'temporal perspectives' (relating to an individual's past/recall, present or future temporal focus), and 'temporal scale' (reflecting on the significance of the length of temporal intervals, for example, days, months, years, on justice dimensions).

Outcomes of organisational justice

The adoption of organisational justice rules in the workplace and perceptions of fair treatment generate beneficial outcomes for organisations and employees (Colquitt et al. 2013; Colquitt and Rodell 2015). Benefits of workplace justice include increasing support of an authority's legitimacy (Tyler and Lind 1992) and acceptance of organisational change (Greenberg 1994). Workplace justice increases employee organisational citizenship behaviours (Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007; Colquitt et al. 2013; Harris, Lavelle, and McMahan 2020), directed at an organisation or at an individual, such as a supervisor (Rupp et al. 2014), positively impacting customer satisfaction and loyalty (Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007). Improved organisational commitment is a further outcome of workplace justice (Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007). In Harris, Lavelle, and McMahan (2020), when health care workers were treated with respect and dignity by clients, commitment increased, also supporting client satisfaction. The impact on customer services on the response of employees to unfair treatment holds implications for competitive advantage (Rupp et al. 2008). In the project context, organisational justice positively influences project performance (Lim and Loosemore 2017; Unterhitzenberger and Bryde 2019; Shafi et al. 2021).

Prior research has also explored the impacts of organisational justice on individual's job satisfaction (Rupp et al. 2014), disruptive (Greenberg and Lind 2000) and counterproductive work behaviour, such as sabotage and aggression (Colquitt et al. 2013; Rupp et al. 2014), and job performance (Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007; Colquitt et al. 2013; Rupp et al. 2014), with perceptions of unfair treatment negatively impacting on job performance (Chih et al. 2017). Justice in the workplace reduces job stress and job burnout

and increases professional efficacy (Yang et al. 2018) and trust (Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007), and reduces employee turnover intentions (Harris, Lavelle, and McMahan 2020). Employee turnover intention increases in response to unfair treatment from customers (Harris, Lavelle, and McMahan 2020), whilst distributive injustice sustains cynicism and procedural and interactional injustice cause exhaustion (Yang et al. 2018).

Organisational justice in projects

This overview on the theoretical background demonstrates that there is a good understanding of organisational justice, how it is influenced and what the outcomes or benefits are. However, most of these studies have been undertaken in the context of permanent organisations with only a limited number of quantitative studies exploring its impact in project contexts (Lim and Loosemore 2017; Unterhitzenberger and Bryde 2019; Shafi et al. 2021). As outlined earlier, projects have developed into a widespread organisational form and are recognised as being temporary organisations with unique characteristics (Lundin and Söderholm 1995), which differ from those of a permanent organisation and establish a particular organisational context (Tyssen, Wald, and Heidenreich 2014) in which justice perceptions are formed. This specifically relates to the concepts of time, task, team and transition which differentiate projects as temporary organisations from permanent organisations (Lundin and Söderholm 1995).

In the project context, justice judgements are made by individuals involved in time-limited and temporary collaborations with individuals, and teams, delivering specific tasks, within predetermined periods. Project characteristics (individuals from heterogenous teams working together for a limited time) have implications for levels of respect and trust between individuals from different organisations (Lim and Loosemore 2017), and for the levels of commitment of team members to project success, and project team leadership behaviours (Tyssen, Wald, and Heidenreich 2014). They therefore have consequences for interpersonal justice, for example in terms of the establishment of respectful and trusting relationships in a time-limited and temporary environment, and for informational justice, for example in terms of decision making and communication in the inter-organisational context. Furthermore, aspects such as implications for informational and procedural justice of the sequential (Lim and Loosemore 2017) and uncertain (Unterhitzenberger and Bryde 2019) characteristics of projects need to be considered, e.g. the opportunities for team members to feedback concerns and the clear communication of information to reduce uncertainty in teams with temporary hierarchies and relationships (Tyssen, Wald, and Heidenreich 2014). In addition, whilst involved in a project, individuals will potentially continue with activities outside of the project with their employer organisation and will be exposed to a duality of authority (i) through the project from the temporary organisation and (ii) through their employing organisation (Lundin and Söderholm 1995; Tyssen, Wald, and Heidenreich 2014). This is pertinent in a sector with high levels of job burnout

(Yang et al. 2018) in terms of distributive justice of dual authority and determination of e.g. workload and job stresses or rewards contribution.

Due to the context sensitivity of justice perceptions we need to get a better understanding of how individuals perceive fairness in projects, how justice perceptions are influenced and what are the impacts (beyond project performance). This paper sets out to explore these questions through a qualitative multi-method study.

Method

In this research, we focus on the perceptions of fairness (and unfairness) in project settings and explore the characteristics, factors, and impacts of organisational justice in this specific context. We are particularly interested in the subjective experiences of project managers and team members and hence, adopt an interpretivist research philosophy with an inductive research approach (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2019). In line with this we've chosen a multi-method qualitative research design involving the diary method (Hyers 2018) and semi-structured interviews adopting the critical incident technique (Flanagan 1954). Diary method allows researchers to 'capture phenomena of interest on a regular basis, in context, and over time' (Hyers 2018, Preface) and involves research participants recording and reflecting on their perceptions of events (Radcliffe 2013). Diary methods therefore potentially minimise retrospection bias and limit recollection mistakes (Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli 2003). This makes them particularly suitable to investigate behavioural and context sensitive topics in project studies such as organisational justice (Unterhitzenberger and Lawrence 2022). On completion of the diary exercise, post-diary interviews were held with the research participants. These provided the opportunity for the research team to follow-up on fair and unfair treatment recorded in the diaries (Gill and Liamputtong 2009), extending the teams understanding of events (Radcliffe 2013). Post-diary interviews also enabled us to discuss interesting examples of fair and unfair treatment ('critical incidents') recorded in the diaries using the critical incident technique (Flanagan 1954). For an in-depth discussion on this research design please see Unterhitzenberger and Lawrence (2022).

Sampling

Research participants were required to either manage a project or be part of a project team and hence, work in the temporary organisational environment of projects. We were looking for junior as well as experienced, senior professionals from any industry. Our participants are all located in Europe and their main role involves working in inter- or intra-organisational projects. We initially recruited fourteen participants of which ten completed both stages of the research. For participant details please see Table 1.

Table 1. Diarist characteristics.

ID	Role	Organisation type	Experience	Diary	Interview
ID1	Project Manager	Construction	0–5 years	X	X
ID2	Project Engineer	Boiler Manufacturer	0–5 years	X	X
ID3	Project Manager	Education Trust	Over 20 years	X	X
ID4	Project Planner	Construction	Over 20 years	X	X
ID5	Mechanical Engineer	University	Over 20 years	X	X
ID6	Research Facilitator	Design and Consulting	0–5 years	X	X
ID7	Communication Lead	Communications	Over 20 years	X	X
ID8	Change Portfolio Manager	Government	10–20 years	Abandoned	
ID9	Building Services Manager	Construction	10–20 years	X	X
ID10	Project Manager	Nuclear Operator	10–20 years	X	X
ID11	Project Manager	Infrastructure Consultancy	10–20 years	Abandoned	
ID12	Commercial Manager	Design and Consulting	10–20 years	Abandoned	
ID13	Project Manager	Airport Operator	10–20 years	X	X
ID14	Project Manager	Management Consultancy	0–5 years	Abandoned	

Table 2. Prompts for diary recording.

You are asked to address the following questions in your diary:
a) Please describe how you felt today.
b) Was there any time today when you felt treated fairly or unfairly?
c) Could you please describe this situation in more detail?
d) Who treated you fairly/unfairly?
e) How did this treatment make you feel?
f) Will you change your behaviour based on this treatment?
g) Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share?

Data collection

Diary method

We collected data through solicited diaries, which means that participants are fully aware of how their diaries will be used by the research team (Milligan, Bingley, and Gatrell 2005). Before the diary writing, we conducted pre-diary interviews with the participants to impart information about how data from the diaries will be used (Radcliffe 2013) and learn about (Radcliffe 2013) and build relationships with them (Matta et al. 2014). This was in the form of a thirty-minute video call, which along with the use of standard documentation and protocols, outlined the research project and what participation would involve. Following the thirty-minute video call, fourteen participants were recruited to take part in the diary study (Table 1).

Participants were asked to record events that met criteria set by the research team (Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli 2003) in an event-based diary, capturing the participants 'relatively immediate and spontaneous assessments of daily experiences' (Poppleton, Briner, and Kiefer 2008, 483). Criteria were detailed in a Diary Instruction Sheet issued to participants. The Diary Instruction Sheet was developed based on literature (Hyers 2018; Unterhitzenberger and Lawrence 2022) and adapted to the topic under investigation. It included information about the expected frequency and timeframe of diary entries, prompts on what to write about (see Table 2), the format of diaries and communication methods between researcher and participants. Over four weeks, participants were asked to record their perceptions of fairness during their working day, at least three times a week. The four-week period/three entries a week frequency was chosen to allow sufficient diary entries to be collected, whilst minimising the burden of diary recoding on the participants.

Diaries were unstructured, although participants were issued prompts to guide diary writing (Hyers 2018). Table 2 details seven questions/prompts outlined in the Diary Instruction Sheet issued to the participants. Participants were asked to send copies of their diaries to the research team at the end of each week. Diaries can be recorded in multiple formats, for example, handwritten, typed, online, audio or video recordings (Hyers 2018). The form of recording was left to the participant to choose with typed electronic diaries being chosen by all participants completing the diary stage of the research project. Participants ID8, ID11, ID12 and ID14 abandoned participation during the diary stage.

Interviews

The interviews provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on their justice perceptions and the experience of recording their diaries. Moreover, the interviews provided the opportunity for the research team to clarify any uncertainties relating to diary entries (Poppleton, Briner, and Kiefer 2008). Following critical incident technique (Flanagan 1954), interesting examples of fair and unfair treatment ('critical incidents') were identified in the diaries and during the interviews participants were asked to describe who was involved in the event, what actions were taken by others and how those actions impacted on the participant at the time, going forward and on their feelings for those involved in the event. Appendix A details the list of questions discussed at the post-diary interview. Following a pilot-interview to test interview protocols, interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. The interviews lasted on average approximately one hour and were audio recorded and subsequently fully transcribed.

Ethics

This study has received full ethical approval from the author's institution (approval number: MEEC 20-002).

Data analysis

We analysed first the diary data of each participant in preparation of the interview and then analysed the interview data, which was followed by data and methods triangulation.
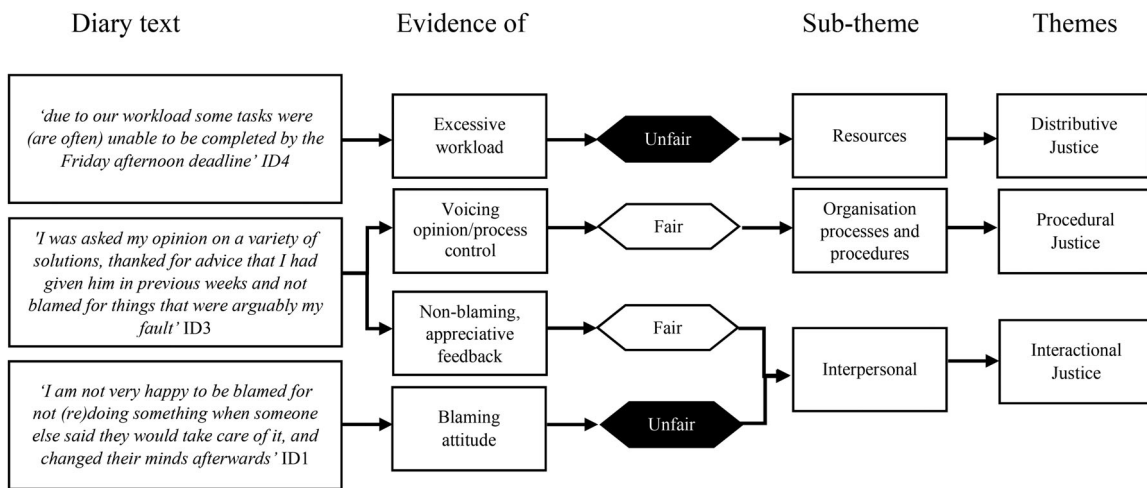
Diary text   Evidence of   Sub-theme   Themes

Figure 1. Examples of initial themes derived from diary analysis.

Diary method

After receiving the final diary entry, an initial stage of qualitative data analysis was undertaken. Template analysis (King 1998, 2004) was used to code and categorise data recorded in 118 daily diaries. Revising an initial template which reflected a priori themes derived from organisational justice and project studies literature, diary data (75 pages, 28,920 words) was categorised into three high-level themes, distributive justice (and two sub-themes, resources, and reward), procedural justice (and sub-themes, relating to organisational and project structures, policies, processes, and procedures) and interactional justice (and two sub-themes, informational and interpersonal).

The coding process involved reading the diaries and identifying text evidencing justice dimensions (see Figure 1). For example, ID4 described in their diary how 'due to our workload some tasks were (are often) unable to be completed by the Friday afternoon deadline' as evidence of excessive workload and distributive justice 'resource' unfairness. ID3 described in their diary how in a meeting with their line-manager 'I was asked my opinion on a variety of solutions, thanked for advice that I had given him in previous weeks and not blamed for things that were arguably my fault' evidence of procedural justice (ID3 had been able to voice their opinion/process control) and interactional-interpersonal justice (non-blaming/appreciative feedback). Conversely, ID1 felt that they had been unfairly blamed for the failings of another 'I am not very happy to be blamed for not (re)doing something when someone else said they would take care of it, and changed their minds afterwards', providing evidence of interactional-interpersonal injustice.

Interviews

This stage of the analysis was completed following the post-diary interviews. The template categories developed from the diary analysis were revised to reflect the data detailed in the transcription of the interviews (148 pages, 69,969 words). Following the same analysis process, interview transcripts were read, and coded to organisational justice themes, but also to new categories emerging from the text. ID4 described, in their diary, an angry exchange with a project team colleague (interactional injustice). In the interview ID4 provided more details 'I could see [source] point, he was waiting for things off me. He'd set some deadlines, reset them, reset them, I couldn't hit them'. The additional text highlighted the source of the unfairness (intra-organisation colleague), that ID4 recognised how their own failings in not providing information on time (understanding own actions) could influence their colleagues treatment of them (understanding actions of others).

Impacts of fairness, and unfairness, were also highlighted through questioning at the interviews. In discussing a critical incident of interactional unfairness in their diary, ID5 commented 'reflecting back when you say, 'treated unfairly', that's probably one of the most disappointing ones, actually, because I had got such a good relationship and such a bond of trust with this [source] that the disappointment was palpable, really … … he's apologised but … … that's changed. He's got to earn that back up again now'. The comments highlighted how ID5's treatment had impacted on their working relationships (trust) with a project contractor (inter-organisation). Analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in changes to the template including additional levels of sub-themes (see Figure 2).

Triangulation

The data obtained through the diaries and the interviews were then triangulated. We employed data triangulation in the sense that data were from different data sources with different characteristics (see Table 1) which facilitated corroboration and compensation of weaknesses (Denzin 2007). We also employed methods triangulation using multiple methods to study one specific phenomenon which resulted in modifications to the analysis as outlined in Figure 2 (Denzin 2012). The initial diary exercise resulted in a data set that allowed the research team to identify occurrences of fair or unfair treatment within the immediate context they occurred. The more in-depth exploration of these occurrences took place in the interviews, for example, diaries could mention a source by name, but there was little background information
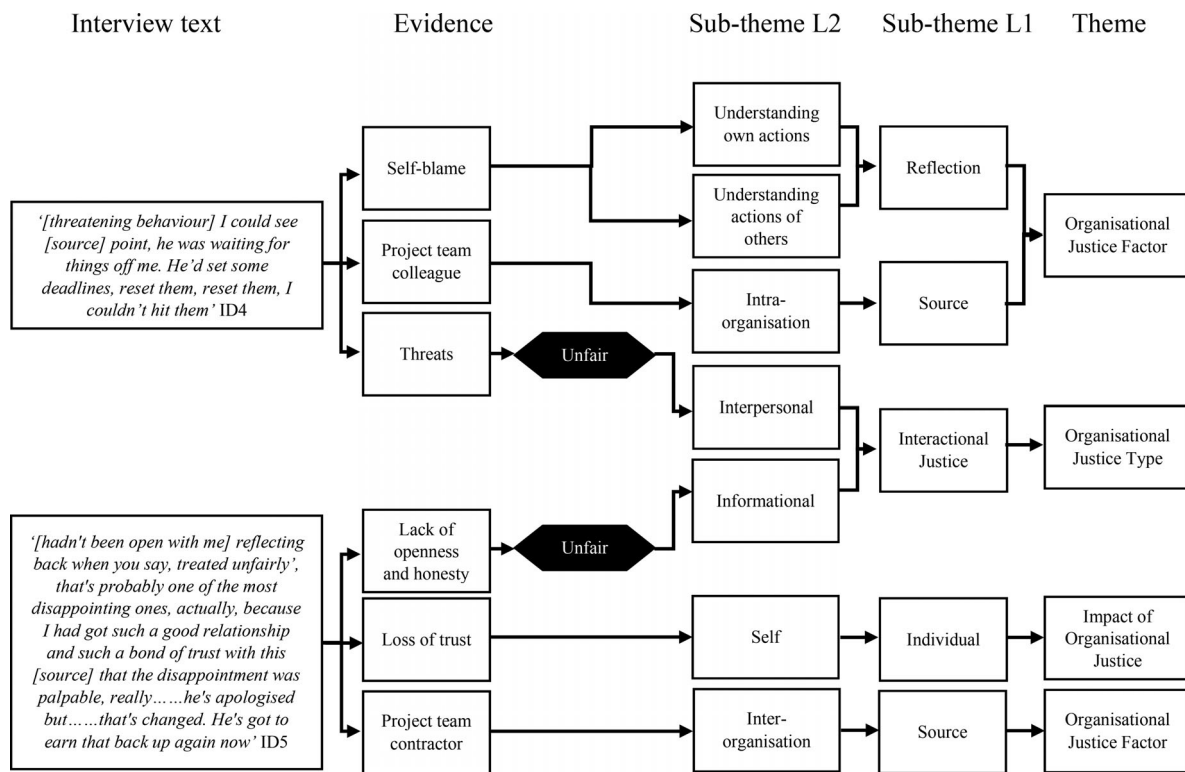
Figure 2. Examples of revised themes derived following interview analysis.

on the source. The follow-on interviews with the participants were an opportunity to fill in the blanks, providing in-depth evidence on not only the sources and impacts of justice, but also placing acts of justice in context, i.e. what happened, before, what happened after, what are the impacts going forward.

Following the triangulations, distributive, procedural, and interactional justice became a sub-theme of organisational justice dimensions, resulting in three revised high-level themes of: organisational justice dimensions, factors (sources of fairness/unfairness, timing, authority/responsibility/accountability, and reflection) and impacts (individual, project, and organisation) of organisational justice (see Table 3). Through the analysis process, illustrative quotes for each theme were identified and recorded in the template, enhancing credibility of the findings.

Findings

In the following the findings from the qualitative multi-method study are presented. First, we introduce the dimensions of organisational justice as experienced in the project context, then the factors influencing justice judgements and finally the impact of organisational justice in the project context.

Dimensions of organisational justice in project contexts

Distributive justice related to the participants perceptions of the fair, or unfair, allocation of resources and rewards. Topics discussed in respect to resource allocation included levels of workload and work pressures, access to skills, experiences

and capabilities including equipment, and allocation of authority, responsibility, and accountability. Fair, or unfair distribution of rewards focused on non-financial criteria, for example, appreciation, recognition of contribution, and opportunities for professional development. The participant's perceptions of fair, or unfair, policies, procedures and standards used for decision making, *procedural justice*, related both to the organisation they were employed by, as well as the project organisation they were working in. Procedural fairness and unfairness, related to clarity of policies, procedures, processes, standards, and regulations (for example, transparency, consistency, and accuracy) and representation (ability to voice opinions, involvement in decision making, open and honest debates). *Interactional justice* related to communication between the participants and organisational and project team authorities and peers. Interpersonal justice involved feelings of fair, and unfair treatment (for example, levels of support, respect, trust, blame, and understanding). Informational justice related to the manner that information and decisions were conveyed to the participants, for example, how information was exchanged (was information clear, truthful, timely, and justifiable?) and from whom (how reliable, competent, consistent, honest, ethical was the source?).

Factors influencing organisational justice judgements in project contexts

Sources of treatment, along with timing of treatment, levels of delegation, and reflective practices, were factors that influenced how the participants evaluated their perceptions of fair, and unfair, treatment in projects.

Table 3. Themes following diary and interview analysis.

OJ Dimensions	Distributive Justice	Allocation of resources	Workload, skills, capabilities, and equipment, delegated powers
		Distribution of rewards	Financial and non-financial including recognition, appreciation, and professional development
	Procedural Justice	Clarity of policies, process and procedures	Accurate, clear, consistent
		Representation in decision making	Voice opinions and influence decisions, open debate
	Interactional Justice	Interpersonal treatment	Supportive, trusting, respectful and non-blaming
		Informational exchange	Reliable, consistent, and competent sources
			Clear, truthful, and timely communications
Factors influencing OJ	Source	Individual or group (team/organisation) source	Intra or inter-organisational source
		Relationship with source	Familiarity and friendship
	Time	Temporality of relationship	Time-limited and temporary relationships (projects) vs permanent relationships (employer organisation)
		Frequency of treatment	Frequent vs infrequent acts of injustice
		Prior experiences	Set treatment in context of career experiences
	Delegated authority	Authority, responsibility and accountability	Senior/junior project professional
			Work independently and make decisions
	Use of reflection	On reasoning behind treatment	Empathy for the different objectives, pressures and poor treatment of sources
			Recognition of lack of own capabilities and skills
		On potential outcomes	Potential to accrue benefits or avoid failure
Impact of OJ	+ve Impact of justice /-ve impact of injustice	On individual	Ways of working (job performance, job turnover, personal and professional development, workloads and work pressures)
			Relationships (trust, strength of relationship, openness)
			Feelings (happiness, sense of being valued and respected, levels of frustration and disappointment, confidence in sources of OJ)
			Health & Well-being (levels of stress, emotional and physical exhaustion, sense of self)
		On organisation	Employee impressions, task delivery, achieving objectives, organisation reputation, staff retention
		On project	Project team relationships, and project delivery
	Injustice as a stimulus for individuals to make changes	Direct impact	New ways of working, building new relationships, asking for help, and developing coping strategies
		Indirect impact	Effectiveness of project and organisation processes

Sources: intra and inter-organisational/individual and organisational

Participants differentiated between justice and injustice, from intra or inter-sources. Intra-sources related to the organisation/sources within the organisation that employed the participant. Inter-sources of justice related to external organisations/sources within external organisations which are part of the temporary project organisation. External organisations included clients, contractors, suppliers, consultants, and stakeholders. Furthermore, in addition to organisational sources, sources of fair and unfair treatment could be individuals (managers, peers, co-workers) or teams (departments, project teams, site teams).

Describing the sources of fair, and in particular unfair treatment, participants explained how treatment from an individual within their own organisation was felt more keenly than treatment by the organisation they worked for or from sources (individual or organisational) external to their own organisation ('I suppose I would more feel a sense of unjust to somebody who was internal rather than external'. (ID9)). Explaining differences in perceptions of treatment from internal and external sources, ID2 explained how they expected the people they reported to within their organisation, such as a line-manager, should be 'aware of what is your situation, what you live every day' and hence 'unfairness from the line manager can arise when his

behaviour is in contrast with what he's supposed to know about you, about your job, about what you do every day'. Conversely, unfair treatment by an external source who 'just don't mean as much to me' (ID9), such as a client who 'cannot know how you feel and … ….who doesn't know you very well' (ID2) are set against 'distant' (ID1) relationships and were felt less keenly by participants.

This is not to say that unjust treatment by external sources is not a concern for participants. ID5 explained how, of all the acts of unfairness they had felt over the period of writing their diary 'one of the most disappointing ones' occurred when a contractor employed by ID5 had failed to highlight a problem and 'because I had got such a good relationship and such a bond of trust with this [source] that the disappointment was palpable, really, when I phoned him up'. This example also exemplifies how, although organisational justice is typically associated with treatment by an authority, for example, a client (inter-source) or line-manager (intra-source), participants also described fair and unfair treatment from subordinates (such as external suppliers), and intra-organisational peers ('if you work, you put effort, time, effort and time on the scheduling and organisation of an activity and for no reason it is constantly and continuously changed [by a peer], this is very, very unfair' (ID2)).

Moreover, ID5's comment also highlighted how closeness of relationships and levels of familiarity with the source of

treatment also influenced perceptions of justice generally, as ID6 explained, 'I don't feel treated unfairly, especially because, actually, my supervisors are really friendly', or, with a specific incident, 'it's not clear cut fairness, there's all kinds of your own biases ... .I think anyone else would've left [intra-source] and walked away and wouldn't be working here. They would probably see him as a very unfair guy, but it depends if you get on with the person generally' (ID4).

Timing: temporality and frequency

Temporality and frequency of acts of fairness, and unfairness, were factors influencing the participant's perceptions of justice in projects. Inter-sources of justice are set in the context of temporary relationships with clients, suppliers, etc. Injustices are tolerated because the participants know that issues relate to temporary project relationships 'they're [source of injustice] not going to be on the pitch for much longer and then I'm going to side-line them out' (ID7) and knowledge that the projects would end 'there was an end-game with that and you knew it would resolve itself when the project came to a conclusion, and there was a definitive date for that, so that was the thing that assisted on that one' (ID5).

A second timing factor, frequency, also influenced the participant's perceptions of justice. As ID6 explained, frequent acts of unfairness were less acceptable than infrequent acts, 'the meeting with my manager where his attitude wasn't great and kind of made me feel a bit spoken down to, if that had been something which was an ongoing issue rather than a one-off, that would've been very different. I would've felt that was very unfair treatment'.

Related to the timing factor, was the influence of career experiences on the participants perceptions of treatment. Experienced participants were willing to set justice treatments in context to career experiences over time, as ID5 explained 'I've learned to accept that .... I've been there eighteen years and I've had ups and downs during that time, ...it's swings and roundabouts'. Using prior experiences of similar situations to set treatment in context, participants recognised fairness 'I felt treated fairly, it was extremely stressful, but I'm used to situations where when things go like that, there's a lot of shouting, there's a lot of accusations, a lot of drama and while it was very stressful, there was none of that. So there were no cross words, there were no inappropriate comments or attempts to make somebody the guilty party' (ID3), but also when unfairness occurred participants had 'learnt that holding a grudge on any of these things just isn't worth – it's not worth the energy' (ID13), advising less experienced colleagues not to 'feel beat up by the situation because there are some difficult days and there are some difficult things that we're going to go through. But just stick with it, the next day is a new day type of thing' (ID9). Moreover, linking experiences over time, with temporality of injustice events, as participants move towards retirements, they have learned to 'not get to wound up about things, given that I'll not be there forever' (ID5).

Delegation: authority, responsibility, and accountability

Levels of authority, responsibility and accountability influenced the justice perceptions of the participants. Participants felt it was unfair to be held accountable for actions for which they were 'not responsible' (ID5) or over which they held no authority as ID7 explained 'if I was thinking about other organisations I've worked for previously .... You'd probably have accountability, but you wouldn't have authority. Definitely not. Or you might be told you've got authority, but you haven't'. Moreover, participants described how it was unfair to be held accountable for performance when they had 'not being given the resource to deliver it which is quite a difficult situation really' (ID7) and criticised for the work of others ('I think it's wrong that we should be attacked and grilled for a programme that we didn't do in the first place' (ID4)). ID13 cautioned that it was incumbent of project management professionals to understand their 'position and power' and make 'sure that you stay true to that. And you aren't delegating that – or trying to delegate that responsibility onto someone else unfairly'.

An example of being treated fairly by their line-managers (intra-sources) for ID6 was they had been given 'a lot of independence in my work and trust that I will deliver what is needed without needing micromanaging' (ID6). Participants who felt free to work independently and were happy with the allocation of authority, responsibility and accountability in their role, did not perceive unfairness to be an issue, for example, senior project managers who had the latitude to make their own decisions and deliver their work, who do not feel constrained by interventions from line-managers (intra-source) 'I kind of like the autonomy or independence' (ID9) or unfairness from inter-source because 'I've got autonomy and authority over what I do. So, there's not really anyone in the alliance that particularly tells me what to do. I know what I need to do. I've got a project I need to deliver, and I get on and do that with my team' (ID7).

Reflection: influence of reflection on perceptions

Participant's perceptions on justice were also influenced by their understanding of why sources of justice and injustice acted the way they did and self-reflection on their own actions, capabilities, and personal/professional gains. Firstly, participants were empathic towards sources of injustice in circumstances were sources had different objectives to the participant ('it just gave me a bit more of an appreciation to understand that certain weeks, people's attention isn't going to be on this project. I need to kind of then speak a bit louder to draw attention back if I need to have those conversations' (ID6)) or did not share the 'same level of commitment to the project' (ID5) as the participant. ID4 and ID5 both recognised that whilst they had been treated unfairly by their respective line-managers, they understood that their line manager 'had got many pressures on him ... ... on some occasions I am absolutely convinced that he was genuinely busy' (ID5) or 'was also in the firing line, maybe just not as visible' (ID4). Pressure was also cited as excuse for the poor behaviour of intra-sources ('I think [senior manager] kind of just was under a lot of stress in the past few months'

(ID6)) and inter-sources ('I understand [source] was under a great deal of pressure' (ID5)). Participants showed understanding towards sources of injustice who had also been treated unfairly ('I can accept that some of what – what could feel unfair or does feel unfair from an emotional level in terms of how they treat projects I know comes from how they're treated' (ID13)) or were reacting to prior disappointment ('the customer sometimes, rightly so I feel, they get carried away a little bit, but I sometimes feel their point' (ID1)).

Secondly, reflecting on the influence of their own actions and capabilities on the unfair actions of others, participants described how '[client representatives] didn't play right, but I could've done something better as well' (ID1), ID4 described how 'I sometimes say yes to a deadline and really I know I can't hit it, but I'll say yes because I think, well I might hit it and if I don't I can probably get around it … .and that drives [intra-source of injustice] bonkers' and ID13 commented that 'it was nothing to do with me, this is all him [intra-source of injustice] and his reporting line, but I still felt this real sense of how could I have handled it differently so they weren't put in that situation'. Furthermore, participants were willing to tolerate unfairness to avoid future personal/professional difficulties ('It's a bit of a difficult situation in some respects, in that it's more annoying than anything else, but what I don't want to do is upset the applecart too much because that team is undertaking a really critical piece of work at the moment which feeds into a key milestone' (ID7)) or to validate past personal/professional commitment ('I've invested a lot of time and effort to get to a stage and the project coming up to its completion. It was one of those 'well, I've wasted three years if the project isn't successful' (ID5)).

Impacts of organisational justice in project contexts

In the diaries, and during the interviews, participants described the impacts of justice and injustice on themselves (individual level), on the organisations involved in the project, and on the project as the temporary organisation in which the treatment occurs.

Impact of organisational justice on individuals and organisations

Participants described how organisational justice had impacted on their ways of working, relationships, feelings, and health and wellbeing. In respect to ways of working, fair treatment of employees by their own organisation (for example, being provided with opportunities to attend conferences, mentoring, and new work opportunities) had supported personal and professional development, whilst investment in equipment (such as IT, and workwear) supported staff performance. Failure by organisations to invest in resources resulted in increased workloads and work pressures on staff, whilst organisational failure to reward, or recognise the contribution of staff, influenced staff decisions to transfers or move to new jobs. Resignations and redundancy were also the result of differences in client-oriented

behaviour across an organisation (procedural injustice) as ID10 explained 'there was quite a big disconnect with what the executive leadership wanted to get out of the relationship with [client] and then the management where I was, and below, what they wanted the relationship to be … .and it contributed to me obviously being made redundant and leaving'.

Participants bonds of trust with individual sources of injustice were increased through acts of interactional fairness but lost following acts of unfairness such as failure to communicate information in a timely and transparent manner. Relationship between the participants and the project/organisation they work for were strengthened through justice 'if you've been valued or treated in a way that's fair, that also sticks more closely to you in your feeling of the organisation or the project' (ID13). However, at an individual level, interactional unfairness (for example, being treated in hostile or accusatory manner) detrimentally impacted future working relationships between the participants and the sources of injustice (peers, managers), for example, making participants less open in future interactions with the source of injustice as ID7 commented 'I won't be sharing as much information with [source] … .He won't know that, but I'll be keeping him at arm's length'.

Accusatory and aggressive behaviour towards participants had also left them feeling scarred and anxious. Lack of resources leading to increased workload/pressures and situations where due process was not followed or participants did not feel they had a 'voice', left participants feeling annoyed, stressed, frustrated, taken for granted, pressurised, disappointed, and embarrassed. Instances where justice sources had recognised the contribution of participants and shown a high regard, appreciation of and confidence in the participants had left participants feeling happy, valued, appreciated, supported, and respected. Furthermore, participant's confidence in the capabilities and competences of sources of justice and that the sources, such as line-managers had the participant's best interests at heart, left participants feeling respect for, and supported by, justice sources.

Beyond feelings, the impacts of organisational justice also affected the health and wellbeing of the participants. Participants described how fair treatment by their organisation (providing quality workwear, equipment, social opportunities) had supported their emotional wellbeing, whilst fair treatment at team level helped participants manage stress and increased their confidence in their own abilities and sense of self ('they make me feel like a respected leader whose direction setting is appreciated' (ID3)). Underperformance of team members, excessive work expectations and workload ('due to our workload some tasks were (are often) unable to be completed by the Friday afternoon deadline. This puts pressure on us that can linger and niggle across the weekend, stopping us from relaxing sufficiently' (ID4)) detrimentally impacted on the health and wellbeing participants, leaving them emotionally and physically exhausted.

Although not discussed by participants as often as impacts at an individual level, unfair and fair treatment of participants by project team members, and the participant's

employer organisation and organisational colleagues, impacted on project organisations and the projects themselves. Organisational effectiveness was supported by participants ('happy to work even harder' (ID1)) when they felt they were valued and being treated with respect and understanding. However, ineffective communications within the participants own organisation led to time wasting, whilst excessive workload and a lack of organisational resources resulted in participants failing to complete tasks. Furthermore, poor treatments of client organisations had resulted in reputational damage to, and staff leaving, employer organisations. Client organisations 'lost out' when 'key [project team] resources that were able to make stuff happen and get things done were moved' (ID10), negatively impacting on project viability and costs. Moreover, increased project delivery costs and programme delays were the result of acts of unfairness between project team members.

Organisational (in)justice as a motivation for change

In general, at an individual level, participants described the positive effects of justice and the negative effects of injustice. However, participants also described how experiences of injustice had, whilst not resulting in overtly positive impacts, acted as a stimulus for change. Injustices lead to the participants developing coping strategies such as 'choosing the battles you can win sometimes and, sometimes, I think letting things go' (ID5), not holding a 'grudge' 'it's not worth the energy' (ID13) and reflecting about 'what's important' (ID9) and what the potential long-term opportunities are ('The payoff, however, is that you work on virtually guaranteed successful projects, as all of [source of injustice] projects tend to be a success' (ID4)).

Following injustice, participants attempted to build new relationships with the sources of injustice ('me and her have had a number of conversations since and she has been more supportive' (ID13)) and participants who had changed jobs built new relationships in general 'on the one hand I've lost some professional friends and colleagues, however, I've gained quite a few more' (ID10). Participants also used unfairness to prompt requests to their managers for 'training' (ID1) and help ('look we need to just have a conversation about workload' (ID4)), and changes in their own behaviours ('overall it's probably encouraged me to be more vocal and so if I see something that is unfair, I just state the facts and do that' (ID10)) and working practices ('since then, at the weekly meetings, if we have diary things to book in, I've then just raised it and said, 'Okay, everyone, let's open our diaries and let's book it at the same time', because it's just meant that I'm doing in front of everybody and we can have that conversation' (ID6)).

The impact of changes made by the participants resulting from injustice, were felt beyond the individual level, supporting fairer and more effective meetings ('we're generally finishing [meeting] fifteen minutes earlier now because everybody ….know they're going to have their opportunity to speak, but also everybody else has that opportunity to listen' (ID13)) and supporting planning at the project level ('I think the lessons that people have learnt as a result and the

improvements that we've put in as a result will hopefully make May go smoother' (ID3)), and organisational level ('it has certainly helped me to try and get a framework put together for future projects' (ID5)).

Discussion

The findings presented above allow us to address the research question we set out to answer as we obtain in depth insight into organisational justice in project contexts. We have identified dimensions of organisational justice, the factors influencing justice judgments and the impacts of fair and unfair treatment in projects.

Project team members perception of organisation justice in projects

Dimensions of organisational justice in projects

Broadly aligning with established dimensions of organisational justice, and reflecting organisational justice research in project disciplines (for example, Chih et al. 2017; Lim and Loosemore 2017; Yang et al. 2018) the findings identify distributive, procedural and interactional justice in the project context. Distributive justice in projects related to the fair and equitable distribution of resources (workload, skills and capabilities, and delegated powers) and rewards, which tended towards non-financial criteria such as receiving recognition, appreciation, and professional development opportunities. Procedural justice in projects related to perceptions of fairness in decision making in project organisations through the application of policies, procedures, processes, standards, and regulations that were accurate, clear, consistent, and provided project team members with the opportunities to voice their opinions and influence decisions. Interactional justice in projects is characterised by supportive, understanding, trusting and respectful treatment from reliable, consistent, and competent sources (individuals and project organisations) who exchange information in a clear, truthful, and timely manner. Overall, this suggests that individuals broadly adopt the established justice rules (Chih et al. 2017; Lim and Loosemore 2017; Yang et al. 2018) in project contexts and use the same or similar criteria to inform their justice judgements as they do in permanent organisations.

Influences on justice perceptions of project team members

We mentioned earlier that the source is one of the most dominant influences on how individuals perceive fairness (Lavelle, Rupp, and Brockner 2007; Cojuharenco, Marques, and Patient 2017). Our findings suggest, that in project contexts other factors also play a role, namely timing, delegation, and reflection. In line with prior research the source of the treatment is an important influencing factor, which can be located across two dimensions: intra vs inter-organisational sources (Rupp et al. 2014; Harris, Lavelle, and McMahan 2020), and individual vs group (teams, organisations) sources (Rupp and Cropanzano 2002; Rupp et al. 2014). We found that justice perceptions are influenced by

the source (Lavelle, Rupp, and Brockner 2007; Cojuharenco, Marques, and Patient 2017) with injustice felt more keenly from intra than inter-sources. Justice perceptions were also influenced by project team member's familiarity, and friendship, with the source emphasising the context specificity of justice judgements and the potential challenges individuals might experience in the temporary, and uncertain, project context, where they are likely to work (i) with individuals, and organisations, they are less familiar with, reinforcing the importance of team working to create trusting and respectful working environments, and (ii) to project policies, procedures and processes that they are unfamiliar with, reinforcing the importance of the clear and timely exchange of accurate information from competent sources who provide individuals a voice to influence decisions. Interestingly we also found that injustice was not hierarchical, and could be felt from non-authority sources, such as peers or subordinates. This has implications for project team members and suppliers/-sub-contractors who need to be aware that their fair or unfair treatment of a client or project manager will create fairness perceptions and can have an impact on the interpersonal and organisational relationship.

Consistent with prior research on the temporal aspects of organisational justice (Ambrose and Cropanzano 2003; Fortin et al. 2016), the findings show that perceptions of justice were influenced by the temporality of the relationship between project team members and the source of the treatment and the frequency of justice treatment. Project team members were willing to tolerate infrequent acts of injustice and instances of injustice when they knew that their treatment was set within the context of time-limited and temporary relationships, such as a project, or phase of a project. This raises potential concerns as, whilst prior research suggests the positive impact of organisational justice on project performance (Lim and Loosemore 2017; Unterhitzenberger and Bryde 2019; Shafi et al. 2021), individuals appear to be less concerned about being treated fairly in project contexts, potentially allowing authorities to exploit the tolerance of project team members. Experienced project team members use a sense of perspective to judge treatment against prior career experiences, appreciating fairness when it occurs, but also considering the temporality of unfair treatment.

A third factor influencing justice judgements is delegation. Unfairness is perceived as less of an issue by project team members (often senior) who have the latitude to work independently and are happy with the balance between authority, responsibility, and accountability in their role, than for project team members held accountable for performance without appropriate resources, or actions for which they have no responsibility or over which they have no authority. This indicates that suitable project governance arrangements considering the four good governance principles of transparency, accountability, responsibility, and fairness (Müller 2017) are likely to support fairness perceptions in project contexts. This has also been suggested by Unterhitzenberger and Moeller (2021) who investigated fair project governance. The project context also potentially exposes project team members to duality of authority (Lundin and Söderholm 1995;

Tyssen, Wald, and Heidenreich 2014), resulting in challenges for project team members as they struggle to balance workload allocation from both authorities or fail to receive appropriate rewards due to a lack of recognition of unseen achievements.

And finally, a fourth factor influencing justice perceptions is reflection. Our findings suggest that project team members reflect on the reasons sources of justice acted the way they did and how their own actions and capabilities potentially contributed to their treatment by the sources of justice. This means that an evaluation of the circumstances under which the treatment is received takes place which once more emphasises the context specificity (Colquitt and Jackson 2006). Project team members also considered the potential to accrue benefits or avoid failure and this impacted on justice perceptions and the willingness of project team members to tolerate unfairness.

Impacts of fair or unfair treatment of project team members

The impact we found most evidence for, and which appears to be of the greatest concern to individuals, is the impact at an individual level. The findings highlighted how across four categories – ways of working, relationships, feelings, and health and wellbeing – fair treatment resulted in positive impacts for project team members, whilst unfair treatment generally resulted in negative impacts on project team members. In terms of ways of working, organisational justice influences job performance (Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007; Colquitt et al. 2013; Rupp et al. 2014; Chih et al. 2017), and job turnover intentions (Harris, Lavelle, and McMahan 2020). Consistent with prior studies, we found that in the project context, organisational justice supported staff performance and personal and professional development, whilst injustice resulted in increased workloads and work pressures, potentially resulting in redundancy or project team member's feeling it necessary to change roles. In terms of relationships, justice in the workplace increases trust (Cropanzano, Bowen, and Gilliland 2007) and the findings show how bonds of trust between project team members and sources of justice were reinforced through fair treatment and damaged following unfair treatment. Being valued by a source of justice strengthened relationships, however hostile and accusatory treatment lead to project team members being guarded in their relationships with sources of injustice. This is in line with previous studies, where organisational justice is considered as a heuristic to judge if an authority can be trusted (Blader and Tyler 2005) and adopted particularly in uncertain environments with projects being prime examples for uncertain environments. In terms of feelings, unfairness from sources of justice, such as accusatory treatment, unacceptable workloads, and procedural failings associated with failure to follow due process or provide project team members with a 'voice', resulted in feelings of anxiousness, annoyance, disappointment, frustration, and embarrassment. These are negative feelings which, if experienced over a sustained period, can cause stress, and have a negative

impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals. Conversely, recognition and appreciation from sources of justice for the contribution and capabilities of project team members, resulted in project team member's feeling appreciated, supported, valued, and respected which in return are likely to lead to organisational and project citizenship behaviour (Shafi et al. 2021). And finally, in terms of health and wellbeing, justice in the workplace reduces job stress whilst injustice cause exhaustion (Yang et al. 2018). Fair treatment by sources helped project team member's manage levels of stress and build levels of confidence in their own sense of self and capabilities, whilst unfair treatment, such as underperformance by others which impacts project team members, and high levels of workload and expectations set by sources of justice, left project team member's feeling emotionally and physically exhausted resulting in less engagement and disconnection from their project and organisation.

Additionally, our findings suggest an impact at the project level on relationships with internal and external project team members as well as overall project delivery. Delivery aspects affected by fair/unfair treatment were schedule, budget, project viability as well as skills available in the project. Many of the impacts at project level are indirect impacts as a consequence of the impacts at the individual level. This is also the case with the impact on the organisational level, were we found that unfairness leaves stronger and more lasting impressions, 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 intraorganisational injustices with project team members being willing to move jobs rather than work for organisations with incompatible values. Reputational damage is also a potential outcome for organisations perceived as acting unfairly, both in respect to external relations with clients or collaborators and internally, for example, in terms of relationships between different parts of the organisation.

The findings also highlight how on occasion organisational injustice acts as a stimulus for change. Responding to unfairness in projects, project team member's implemented new ways of working, built new relationships, were prompted to ask for help, and developed coping strategies to address current injustice and mediate the impact of future organisational injustice. Indirectly, changes made by project team members to address unfairness occasionally result in more effective project and organisation processes.

Overall, we found that the impacts of organisational justice on the different levels are complex and interconnected. An impact at an individual level, such as feeling anxious or frustrated, can have knock on effects on the project through e.g. project citizenship behaviour on project performance and then subsequently on the employing organisation. The perception of fairness 'lies in the eye of the beholder' (Colquitt et al. 2018, 159) and therefore is an individual experience shaped by a multitude of personal and environmental factors. In project contexts, individuals and organisations need to develop an awareness of the impact fair and unfair treatment has on individuals and the subsequent potentially detrimental effects on the project and organisation. Whilst we found that unfair treatment can occasionally be a catalyst for change, this is not the norm. We caution against justifying unfair treatment in the hope for the development of new ways of working. Whilst this was occasionally the case, it should be remembered that the stimulus for new ways of working were acts of injustice.

Conclusion

The findings in this paper show how fair treatment is characterised in project contexts through the justice perceptions of project team members. We found that project team members adopt the established justice rules of distributive, procedural and interactional justice in the temporary environment of projects. Despite the significantly different contexts of permanent organisations and temporary organisations, organisational justice perceptions in both settings are largely aligned. However, we found that the factors which influence justice judgements are more varied in project contexts and include the source of the treatment, the timing and temporality of the treatment, the levels of delegation as well as reflective practices of the individuals receiving the treatment. We also identified that fair or unfair treatment impacts the ways of working, feelings, relationships and health and wellbeing of project professionals and that these impacts subsequently effect the temporary and the permanent organisation. These novel insights extend our understanding of the perceptions of fairness and unfairness in temporary organisations and therefore contribute to the development of the theory on organisational justice. They specifically address the under-researched area of context specificity of organisational justice by investigating an increasingly relevant context, namely the project as the temporary organisation. This research also makes an important contribution to the research stream of project behaviour (Unterhitzenberger 2021) and more specifically to behaviour in projects as it provides insights into the behaviour of people within project settings.

Policy and practice implications

This work also has implications for policy and practice on different levels. Firstly, the project profession needs to take action to raise awareness of the impact of fair and unfair treatment on individuals, organisations, and projects. Secondly, organisations need to embed fair procedures in project team working and enable project managers and team members to implement fair processes and procedures by 1) building skills and capabilities of project team members and managers in how organisational justice can be adopted in projects; 2) developing suitable governance arrangements which take into account organisational justice (Unterhitzenberger and Moeller 2021); 3) allowing for appropriate delegation of levels and balance of authority, responsibility and accountability and 4) capturing and learning from prior examples of injustice. Thirdly, injustice from individual sources were felt most acutely by project team members and therefore individuals (whether that be intra-

organisational line-managers and peers, or inter-organisational team members) need to develop awareness of the impact of their own actions on others, seeking feedback and amending actions to create a fair and equitable working environment for project team members.

Limitations and areas for further research

Evidently, this research has some limitations. We employed a novel research method in the field of project and operations management and were only able to collect diary data over a period of four weeks. This leads to certain limitations as only the events which occurred during these four weeks were captured by the diaries. Despite the resource intensity, future research could adopt a longer diary period to see if different events are captured. Additionally, several participants abandoned the diary exercise whilst it was underway. This has potentially skewed the data as we do not have information from these participants. Nevertheless, this research set the ground for future research into organisational justice in project contexts. This includes but is not limited to 1) the exploration of justice perceptions of project stakeholders, 2) the investigation of fairness considerations in project leadership, and 3) the examination of the interaction of organisational justice in projects with other justice concepts such as social justice or energy justice. Overall, we hope that this research is a starting point for more work in this area to further enhance our understanding of justice perceptions in project contexts.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Dr Christine Unterhitzenberger is an Associate Professor in Project Management at the University of Leeds and Director of the Leeds Centre for Projects. She is a Chartered Project Professional. Her research is focused on organisational and relational aspects in projects and has been published in the leading journals in the field as well as presented at major international conferences. She is a Department Editor for the Project Management Journal®, founding chair of the Project Experiences Special Interest Group at the British Academy of Management, and former chair of the Research Advisory Group of the Association for Project Management. She has taught on various undergraduate and postgraduate programs for different aspects of project management as well as research methods. She has also developed and delivered project management courses for Executive Education and is a regular speaker at industry events.

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Appendix A: Post-diary interview questions

1. Can you tell us a little bit about your role, your projects, your reporting line and your organisation?
2. From your diaries we have selected examples of 'fair' and 'unfair' events. We would like to discuss these examples in more detail.
   a) Can you please describe the people involved in the event (roles and organisations), their relationship to you and the project that you are all collaborating on?
   b) Can you describe the actions of each person in the event and how their actions made you feel?
   c) Will this event impact on how you do your work in the future? If so, why, and how?
   d) Does this event impact on how you feel about the individuals involved? If so, why, and how?
3. In completing the diary you have had an opportunity to reflect on whether you are being treated fairly or unfairly:
   a) Do you ever think about if you are being treated fairly or not? What would you describe as fair treatment?
   b) Do your perceptions of fairness (or how you are treated) differ if your treatment is due to the actions of your line-manager (or someone in your organisation) or due to the actions of someone outside of your organisation (for example, a client, or someone within your project team, but outside of your organisation)?
   c) What has been your experience of writing the diary?
4. Would it be possible to provide further details on specific information detailed within the diary texts to ensure we have the appropriate understanding of your notes?
5. Is there anything you would like to add to what has been said already? Anything else you would like to talk about?