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# Investigating the Roles of Felt Obligation and Politics in the Context of Procedural Justice-Outcome Relationships

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Investigating the Roles of Felt Obligation and Politics in the Context of  
Procedural Justice-Outcome Relationships

An honors thesis presented to the  
Department of Psychology,  
University at Albany, State University of New York  
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## Abstract

Social Exchange Theory positions employee felt obligation as a mechanism by which organizational justice leads to positive organizational outcomes such as decreased turnover and increased job satisfaction. However, little has been done to test the empirical value of this theoretical claim. Additionally, although organizational politics is generally negatively correlated with justice, investigation of the mechanism by which politics might influence justice is lacking. Here, I look at whether politics has a moderating role on procedural justice and felt obligation, and thus turnover intentions and job satisfaction, or in words, whether politics reduces the positive relationship between procedural justice and felt obligation. In the current study, a sample of Amazon Mechanical Turk users ( $N = 294$ ) were compensated to take an online survey measuring procedural justice, felt obligation, politics, turnover intentions, and job satisfaction. Evidence was found to support the claim that felt obligation partially mediates procedural justice-turnover and -job satisfaction relationships. Additionally, the relationship between felt obligation and job satisfaction offers empirical support for value theory. The presence of felt obligation may indicate employee needs are being fulfilled, thus leading to greater satisfaction. No evidence was found to support politics as a moderator of the justice-felt obligation relationship. The current study should prompt further research into felt obligation as a mediator for justice-outcome relationships. Future studies should also clarify the influence of politics on justice.

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## **Introduction**

Organizational justice is broadly defined as fairness in the workplace. It is associated with a wide range of outcomes including outcome satisfaction, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, trust, evaluation of authority, organizational citizenship behaviors, withdrawal, negative reactions, and performance (Colquitt, Scott, Rodell, Long, Zapata, & Conlon, 2001).

An important outcome of organizational justice is employee turnover, which falls under withdrawal behaviors (Colquitt et al., 2001). In the business world, turnover is important to a company's bottom-line. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, turnover levels are increasing, with 59 million U.S. employees leaving their jobs in 2015 (Catalyst, 2016). Surveys also showed that in 2015, 37% of U.S. employees have entertained notions of leaving their jobs, which is up from 33% in 2011 (Catalyst 2016). In order to replace an employee lost from turnover, companies reportedly spend up to 50%-60% of that worker's annual salary, sometimes surpassing the salary altogether (Catalyst, 2016). Even the median amount that companies spend to replace an employee is substantial at 21.4% of annual salary (Catalyst, 2016).

Job satisfaction is a justice outcome deserving of attention as well. Job satisfaction is associated with lower levels of counterproductive work behavior, that is, employee behaviors that are detrimental to organizations (Morrison, 2008), and research has shown that job satisfaction is also negatively related to turnover intentions (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986). Thus, it is important for companies that want to avoid the negative effects of low job satisfaction and high turnover to take steps to maintain or improve job satisfaction.

As aforementioned, a meta-analysis by Colquitt et al. (2001) provides evidence that organizational justice leads to improved job satisfaction, while also discouraging employee turnover. According to Cropanzano, Rupp, Mohler, and Schminke (2001), Social Exchange

Theory (SET) posits that employee fairness perceptions contribute to strong exchange relationships between individuals and their organizations; these relationships contribute to felt obligation, and, in turn, to other benefits such as better performance. Briefly, felt obligation relates to the norm of reciprocity, which suggests that employees feel compelled to help the organization in reaction to perceived beneficial treatment from the organization (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). Following from this, if an employee perceives fair treatment by the organization, the employee is likely to behave in ways that further benefit the organization in return. Felt obligation has been shown to mediate the relationship between perceived organizational support and affective organizational commitment, organizational spontaneity, and in-role job performance in such a way that it benefits the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Eisenberger et al. (2001) also stated that felt obligation should result in fewer withdrawal behaviors, but did not find a significant relationship for this. Arshadi (2011), testing for the mediational role of felt obligation between perceived organizational support and turnover, did find significant support for a felt obligation-turnover relationship. Additionally, Locke's (1976) value theory may account for the influence of felt obligation on job satisfaction. Yet little has been done to garner definitive empirical evidence for felt obligation as a mediator of justice and its outcomes (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2013; Shannon, Roch, Martin, Swiderski, Agosta, & Shanock, 2014).

The presence of multiple dimensions of organizational justice is well researched, so it is helpful to distinguish what type of justice to focus on when testing justice outcomes (Colquitt et al., 2001). While there is not conclusive evidence that procedural justice, that is, fairness pertaining to processes at work (Colquitt et al., 2001), has the most bearing on the justice outcomes of turnover (e.g. Aryee, Budhwar, & Chen, 2002; Riolli & Savicki, 2006) and job

satisfaction (e.g. Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000; Mossholder, Bennett, & Martin, 1998), there is enough evidence to warrant further investigation. In light of the practical relevance of turnover and job satisfaction, adding empirical evidence to the literature examining the relationships between procedural justice, felt obligation, turnover, and job satisfaction could have significant implications for the workplace. The steep cost of employee turnover is a frequent burden on employers, and job satisfaction has often been credited as contributing to turnover as well (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986).

Furthermore, “politics” is ubiquitous within organizational and workplace contexts, and the behaviors associated with politics will often make employees reflect on the fairness of their workplaces (Kacmar & Carlson, 1991). Once an employee enters into a new workplace, it does not take long for him or her to start to decipher the differences between the formal policies and procedures the company explicitly espouses, and the way in which things truly operate on a day-to-day basis. Specifically, organizational politics, or self-serving employee behavior, heavily impacts the way things actually ‘get done’ in the workplace (Ladebo, 2006). For example, this can take the form of one employee taking credit for the work of another, or a supervisor reviewing subordinates more favorably in order to make himself or herself look better.

Even though research has investigated the negative relationship between politics and perceptions of fairness (Ladebo 2006), few have investigated the mechanisms connecting politics with fairness, exactly how politics may influence justice, as well as outcomes of justice, in the workplace. Several studies have found evidence that procedural justice is particularly relevant when studying politics (e.g. Aryee, Chen, & Budhwar, 2004; Byrne, 2005). Citing Ferris, Russ, and Fandt (1989) and Ferris, Frink, Beehr, and Gilmore (1995), Andrews and Kacmar (2001), state that this emphasis on procedural justice pertaining to politics is connected to employees’



perceptions of their work environments and the degree to which decisions are made based on established procedures.

Investigating the role of politics in a procedural justice-felt obligation relationship would help relieve the dearth of literature on felt obligation, politics, and justice outcomes. If procedural justice is specifically relevant to organizational politics (e.g., Aryee et al., 2004; Byrne, 2005; Ferris et al., 1995) and felt obligation (e.g., Masterson et al., 2000), as studies suggest, then these relationships may shed greater light on the mechanisms of justice processes and felt obligation, and the resulting outcomes of job satisfaction and turnover intentions.

Very little research has empirically investigated felt obligation in justice-outcome relationships or in the realm of politics, so this study adds to the literature by increasing our knowledge of these mechanisms. Because organizational justice and organizational politics are pertinent to virtually all workplace settings, research on these issues will also help in a practical way to inform companies on the power of fairness in the workplace. This type of knowledge could allow companies to design work interventions targeting politics in the office, as well as create fairer policies to deal with any fallout caused by self-serving behaviors, such as an employee failing to give due credit to a coworker or promotion decisions made for reasons other than those that are guided and permitted by policy.

### **Organizational Justice**

Organizational justice is well established in the literature, and has undergone many revisions to its basic constructs. Adams (1965) originally rooted organizational justice in equity theory. According to Adams (1965), the contribution of a worker could be scaled against the outcome, or what was received in return for work, to determine fairness. This brand of justice came to be known as distributive justice. However, as methods of measuring justice progressed,

more and more dimensions that could be distinguished from each other emerged. This resulted in two, three, and four factor models of justice that have been widely studied. Others have also found nontraditional forms of these multi-factor models (e.g. Flint, Haley, & McNally, 2012).

Procedural justice was the first of several distinct dimensions that stem from distributive justice. According to Leventhal, Karuza, and Fry (1980) and Thibaut and Walker (1975), this dimension focuses on the fairness of the procedures used in coming to a decision or outcome. Fair processes can be defined as consistent, unbiased, and ethical. Fair processes must also take into concern the wishes and welfare of all parties involved, provide a method for amending any mistakes that may come about, and all decisions must be based on the most accurate information available (Leventhal et al., 1980). This break from a unidimensional model was contested by support for a monistic perspective. Cropanzano and Ambrose (2001) asserted that procedural justice may be contingent on outcomes, thus making it hard to discriminate between distributive and procedural justice. Additionally, Welbourne, Balkin, and Gomez-Mejia (1995), found a correlation of .74 between distributive and procedural dimensions. Despite this, a meta-analysis of justice studies by Colquitt et al. (2001) shows substantial evidence for separate constructs of distributive and procedural justice, though this varies based on how researchers operationalize procedural justice.

The advent of a three-factor model of justice came with the distinction between procedural justice and interactional justice (Bies & Moag, 1986). Interactional justice encompasses interpersonal treatment as a factor in determining fairness perceptions (Bies & Moag, 1986). Yet, according to Flint et al. (2012), there is not a consensus on whether these should truly be separate. Other research calls for a four-factor model of justice, thus eliminating interactional justice and supplanting it with two other dimensions, interpersonal and

informational (Colquitt et al. 2001). Interpersonal justice reflects how politely or respectfully workers are treated by superiors, while informational justice applies to how well-informed workers are by their superiors about why an outcome is the way it is (Colquitt et al., 2001). The meta-analysis by Colquitt et al. (2001) found evidence that the four dimensions of distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational are distinct constructs.

Even though Colquitt et al.'s (2001) meta-analysis is compelling evidence for the distinction of these four constructs in particular, other researchers have found evidence for nontraditional multifactor models of justice. Flint et al. (2012) investigated justice in the context of a call center and concluded that the data supported a three-factor model consisting of distributive, procedural, and informational justice dimensions. The authors further stated that context is an important consideration for justice research, which has been acknowledged by other scholars as significant in our understanding of organizational behavior in general (e.g. House, Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995; Johns, 2006).

The present study focuses on the dimension of procedural justice due to its importance to justice-outcome relationships involving turnover intentions and job satisfaction. Colquitt et al. (2001) concluded that, when paired with distributive justice, procedural justice had a dominant effect on certain outcomes, including job satisfaction, but did not find evidence for such an effect on behavioral variables such as withdrawal. Furthermore, Aryee, Budhwar, and Chen (2002) found relationships between procedural justice and both job satisfaction and turnover intentions that were partially mediated by trust, and Riolli and Savicki (2006) found low procedural justice predicted turnover.

### **Outcomes of Justice: Turnover and Satisfaction**

Varying research results involving procedural justice and the justice outcomes of turnover and job satisfaction can be found across the literature. Aryee et al. (2002) determined that there was a relationship between procedural justice and turnover intentions, which was found to be mediated by trust in the organization, such that higher procedural justice levels led to higher trust evaluations and thus lower turnover intentions. Moreover, Riolli and Savicki (2006) found a negative relationship between procedural justice and the outcomes of turnover, burnout, and strain. Additionally, a distinction should be made between turnover and intention to turnover. Because it is difficult to track whether an employee truly leaves an organization after stating intentions to resign, much research, including the present research, focuses on turnover intentions versus turnover.

Defining job satisfaction helps illuminate how this concept is relevant to justice and turnover intentions. Job satisfaction refers to how much an employee likes his or her job (Spector, 1997). It has clear benefits for employees, including association with better resilience and higher energy levels (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). For organizations, higher levels of employee job satisfaction can increase performance, as well as decrease turnover and counterproductive work behaviors (Morrison, 2008). Cotton and Tuttle (1986) and Teoh, Coyne, Devonish, Leather, and Zarola (2015) also replicated findings that job satisfaction correlates with turnover intentions, thus job satisfaction is notable for the same reasons as turnover. A number of studies cited in Colquitt et al. (2001; e.g. Masterson et al., 2000; Mossholder, Bennett, & Martin, 1998; Wesolowski & Mossholder, 1997), found substantial evidence for significant correlations specifically between the dimension of procedural justice and job satisfaction.

### **Social Exchange Theory and Felt Obligation**

The relationship between procedural justice and justice outcomes is commonly accounted for by Social Exchange Theory (SET). A prototypical model of contemporary SET, stated in Cropanzano et al. (2001), positions social exchange processes as a mediating organizational justice and work-related attitudes and outcomes, like job satisfaction and performance.

According to Blau (1964), SET operates such that organizations that communicate their support to employees, such as by treating their employee fairly, will see employees reciprocate in the form of commitment and behaviors that are advantageous to the organization (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). Social exchange theories stem from the norm of reciprocity, which propose that a favor begets a favor in return (Gouldner, 1960). So, if an employee perceives that the organization values her and her work, and if she believes it is appropriate to base work effort on how the organization has treated her, then the employee will feel obligated to work to further the organization and maintain its well-being.

Furthermore, according to Eisenberger et al. (2001), felt obligation refers to whether an employee believes he or she should care about the organization and actively work to reach the organization's goals, based on how the employee perceives the organization treats him or her. Felt obligation denotes a worker's feeling of obligation to help his/her company which leads to behaviors that help, rather than hurt an organization (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

Previously, felt obligation has been investigated in the context of perceived organizational support (POS; employee beliefs about how much the organization cares for the worker and values his/her work) and POS outcomes (Eisenberger et al., 2001). However, though SET suggests that felt obligation has an important role in justice-outcome links, little has been done to empirically investigate whether felt obligation is a significant mediator in this specific context (Cropanzano et al., 2001).

## **Felt Obligation as a Mediator for a Procedural Justice—Turnover and Procedural Justice—Job Satisfaction Relationships**

Even though it has been theoretically proposed, there has been little research conducted to empirically test whether felt obligation mediates relationships between justice and outcomes. In other words, the literature needs more evidence in order to determine that felt obligation has a definitive role in explaining the relationship between justice and outcomes. In the earliest study on the topic that could be found, Shannon et al. (2014) investigated the role of felt obligation in justice-outcome relationships using the SET framework. Specifically, the researchers examined justice perceptions in relation to employee performance, and found evidence that felt obligation does in fact mediate the relationship between justice and performance. They also noted that not all justice dimensions were influenced by felt obligation equally. The dimension of interpersonal justice failed to produce significant results, as opposed to distributive and procedural justice dimensions.

Following from the work of Shannon and colleagues (2014), this study sought to extend our understanding of felt obligation as a justice-outcome mediator by looking at its effect on the relationships between procedural justice and the outcomes of turnover intentions and job satisfaction, rather than performance. As aforementioned, Shannon et al. (2014) found support for felt obligation as a mediator for justice-performance relationships. Turnover and job satisfaction are also pervasive outcomes in organizations, so this study has high practical significance (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001).

Fair processes at work (i.e. procedural justice) should indicate to an employee that the organization is doing something to support him/her, and thus lead the employee to feel the need to reciprocate (i.e. felt obligation). Given that turnover intentions should be a clear indicator of

low levels of reciprocity, low levels of felt obligation are also expected (Eisenberger et al., 2001). For example, Riolli and Savicki (2006) found a significant, negative felt obligation-turnover relationship, as did Arshadi (2011). Previous research has also demonstrated that justice has a negative relationship with turnover intentions (Colquitt et al., 2001). Therefore, felt obligation should be more likely to discourage turnover intentions after procedurally just treatment.

Felt obligation as it applies to job satisfaction may be explained by value theory. According to value theory, as proposed by Locke (1976), certain aspects of work are valued more by a worker (e.g., pay) and will have a greater impact on overall job satisfaction than those aspects that the individual employee does not value as much. Furthermore, the extent to which these valued aspects are addressed by the organization (e.g., offering fair wages), will correspond to overall job satisfaction. In the case of felt obligation, the existence and extent of an employee's feelings of reciprocity towards an organization indicate that the organization is fulfilling the employee's needs (or things the employee values; Eisenberger et al., 2001). As a result, the employee should experience higher levels of job satisfaction along with higher levels of felt obligation (i.e., the extent to which values are being addressed). As mentioned above, procedural justice should lead to felt obligation as fair processes should engender greater feelings of reciprocity, and felt obligation (i.e. the presence of fulfilled needs) should lead to job satisfaction. Thus, procedural justice should act through felt obligation to produce job satisfaction.

*Hypothesis 1a: Procedural justice will have a negative relationship with turnover intentions.*

*Hypothesis 1b: Procedural justice will have a positive relationship with job satisfaction.*

*Hypothesis 2a: Felt obligation will mediate the relationship between procedural justice and job satisfaction.*

*Hypothesis 2b: Felt obligation will mediate the relationship between procedural justice and turnover intentions.*

## **Organizational Politics**

There is evidence that procedural justice is highly intertwined with the construct of organizational politics (Aryee et al., 2004). Generally, politics (self-serving employee behavior) is seen as having a negative relationship with justice (Aryee et al., 2004). Earlier in the literature, there was less consensus for a definition of organizational politics (Kacmar & Carlson, 1997). A very broad definition consisted of thinking of politics as simply a way to exert influence, either positive or negative, in the workplace (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997). Nevertheless, a narrower definition of organizational politics came to the forefront. Today, organizational politics is typically defined as behavior that serves to safeguard and advance the self-interests of an individual or group, which comes at the expense of other employees and the organization (Kacmar & Baron, 1999; Kacmar & Carlson, 1997; Ladebo, 2006). This definition gives politics a decidedly negative connotation, but other studies have found positive effects and understandings of politics. In a qualitative study, Landells and Albrecht (2015) found some employees viewed organizational politics as having positive consequences such as higher productivity, increased communication, and career progression. For example, research investigating salespersons has found that organizational politics was positively associated with better work performance (Yen, 2015). This was attributed to the specific characteristics, such as commission-based salaries, associated with sales work, which differ from those of other groups of workers that have been studied. Yen (2015) noted that salespersons often conform their interests and behaviors to the organization's politics in order to be successful. The researcher suggested that the dissimilar results garnered from salespersons could stem from differences in



work motivations, pointing to the fact that sales performance is integral to not only an individual salesperson's salary and promotion, but also the entire organizational performance.

Furthermore, there is individual variability in the way different employees perceive organizational politics (Landells & Albrecht, 2015). Based on an employee's level of control of in a situation, the politics he or she perceives can differ (Ferris et al., 1989). Because of this, researchers tend to measure *perceptions* of organizational politics (Kacmar & Carlson, 1997), which is also the case in the present study. Thus, reference to organizational politics can be equated to perceptions of organizational politics (POPs).

### **Procedural Justice and Organizational Politics**

Procedural justice is especially influential in the context of organizational politics, and the relationship between the two is generally negative (e.g. Aryee et al., 2004; Byrne, 2005; Ferris et al., 1995). Andrews and Kacmar (2001) give the example of employees questioning a promotion decision because the process for coming to that decision was perceived to have been governed by political behavior. Had the employees felt a degree of control over the decision, such as the decision-making process adhering to the formal rules that were set forth when they came into their positions, then perhaps no violations of organizational justice would be perceived. Additionally, Byrne (2005) concluded that procedural justice mitigated the effects of covert political behavior (though this was not the case for overt political behavior). In fact, the relationship between organizational politics and procedural justice is so close that there have been several research studies considering the discriminant validity between the two constructs (Andrews & Kacmar, 2001; Aryee et al., 2004). These studies have found that the constructs are indeed distinct; however, the juxtaposition of such a close association with a consistent,

significantly negative correlation between the two, leads to questions about what would result if high levels of procedural justice and high levels of politics were perceived simultaneously.

### **Procedural Justice—Felt Obligation Relationship Moderated by Politics**

As mentioned above, organizational politics and procedural justice appear intertwined, yet research supports that they are separate constructs. Looking at the definition of procedural justice (the fairness of processes at work) and the definition of organizational politics (self-serving behaviors in the workplace that are generally viewed as negative and harmful to the organization), it is easy to understand why so many studies have found significant negative relationships between the two concepts (e.g. Aryee et al., 2004; Byrne, 2005; Ferris et al., 1995). However, if both procedural justice and politics levels are high in an organization, it is possible that this combination may influence felt obligation in the organization. As mention earlier, procedural justice and felt obligation are linked theoretically via Social Exchange Theory (SET), which proposes that felt obligation is a mechanism by which procedural justice may result in outcomes such as increased job satisfaction and decreased withdrawal behaviors (Cropanzano et al., 2001). Thus, if procedural justice were perceived as high, felt obligation would also be increased.

Following from this, if procedural justice were high and politics were high, it is possible that increased politics would mitigate the relationship between procedural justice and felt obligation. Perceptions of high procedural justice as well as high perceptions of politics are seemingly in conflict with each other. If an employee believes that correct and just work processes are in fact being followed, then how can an employee simultaneously perceive high levels of politics?

It may be that an employee believes that formal processes are being followed, at least explicitly as the processes pertain to that employee, while organizational politics are negotiating informal procedures or procedures that do not explicitly pertain to that employee but may still affect the employee. This conflict, where formal processes are being followed, yet self-serving behaviors persist, could suppress the positive relationship between procedural justice and felt obligation. In other words, the presence of politics will result in a weaker than usual relationship between procedural justice and felt obligation.

Thus, I propose that organizational politics may impact the strength of the procedural justice-felt obligation relationship, specifically, politics will weaken this relationship.

*Hypothesis 3: Politics will moderate the relationship between procedural justice and felt obligation such that when perceptions of politics increase, then the relationship between procedural justice and felt obligation decreases.*

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants for this study ( $N = 383$ ) consisted of survey takers from Amazon's Mechanical Turk service. Eighty-nine participants who answered at least one item designed to catch random responders incorrectly were dropped, leaving a remaining sample of 294 participants. In total, five random responder questions were distributed throughout the survey and included items such as, "If you are reading this, choose Strongly Agree." Of the remaining participants ( $N = 294$ ), a slight majority of participants identified as male (51.2%) and a majority of the sample fell in the age ranges of 26-30 years old (27%) and 31 years and older (63.1%). The racial makeup of the sample was also dominated by participants of Caucasian heritage (81.8%), followed by those of African (7.5%), Latino/a (7.2%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (3.4%) heritage. Participants who worked 31 or more hours per week made up 84.3% of

respondents to the survey, and a similar percentage of participants reported having worked at his/her organization for 12 months or more (86.6%) and/or having worked in his/her position for 12 months or more (82.3%). Most participants reported being in positions considered at the Manager/Supervisor level (35.5%), Associate level (37.2%), and Entry level (25.9%). Participants also reported a wide variety of work backgrounds, including social work, sales, human resources, teaching, software engineering, personal fitness training, law, and culinary work. Participants were also asked if they viewed politics in the workplace as having a positive or negative effect. Negative views of politics were the majority (58.5%), though 18.8% of respondents believed workplace politics has a positive effect and 22.5% were not sure if workplace politics has a positive effect.

## **Measures**

*Perceptions of Organizational Politics.* The measure for organizational politics was drawn from Kacmar and Carlson (1997). It is a 15-item measure with answers ranging from 1 (*definitely not representative*) to 5 (*definitely representative*). Items are grouped into three categories—“general political behavior”, “go along to get ahead”, and “pay and promotion policies”—but averaged to form one overall politics score. Sample items include “People in this organization attempt to build themselves up by tearing others down,” “It is best not to rock the boat in this organization,” and “None of the raises I have received are consistent with the policies on how raises should be determined.” Cronbach’s alpha was .92.

*Procedural Justice.* Procedural justice was measured with the new procedural justice scale developed by Colquitt, Long, Rodell, and Halvorsen-Ganepola (2015), and it distinguishes between justice (fairness) and injustice (violation of fairness). The assessment consists of 14 items and uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*To a very small extent*) to 5 (*To a very*

*large extent*). Participants were instructed to “refer to the procedures your supervisor uses to make decisions about pay, rewards, evaluations, promotions, and so forth” in answering the items. A couple sample items that demonstrate the justice/injustice concept are, “Are you able to express your views during those procedures?” versus “Do your views go unheard during those procedures?” Cronbach’s alpha was .93.

*Felt Obligation.* Felt obligation was measured using the scale found in Eisenberger et al. (2001) which uses a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). There are 7 items. Sample items include “I owe it to my work organization to give 100% of my energy to its goals while I am at work,” and “I feel that the only obligation I have to my work organization is to fulfill the minimum requirements of my job.” Cronbach’s alpha was .87.

*Intentions to Turnover.* Intentions to turnover were measured using the 3-item Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire from Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1983) with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Sample items are “I often think about quitting,” and “I will probably look for a new job in the next year.” Cronbach’s alpha was .90.

*Job Satisfaction.* How satisfied a subject was/is with his or her job was determined using a measure from the 3-item Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire by Camman et al. (1983). Items included “All in all, I am satisfied with my job,” and “In general, I don’t like my job.” Participants responded on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach’s alpha was .94.

## **Procedures**

The survey was administered anonymously online and subjects received a remuneration of \$0.60 for completing the survey remotely. Subjects were first asked to read the informed

consent and choose whether they would consent to participate. They were then asked a series of demographic questions, followed by a few questions related to the workplace to give a better idea of the kind of job or position they hold. The remainder of the items were part of the measures used in the study. In total, subjects were asked to answer approximately 75 items and the average response time for the original sample of  $N = 383$  was approximately 15 minutes.

## **Results**

Table 1 details the descriptive statistics and correlations among POPs, felt obligation, procedural justice, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. As expected, politics was significantly negatively correlated with felt obligation, procedural justice, and job satisfaction. Moreover, politics was positively associated with turnover intentions. Felt obligation had significant positive relationships with procedural justice and job satisfaction, but was negatively related to turnover intentions. Unsurprisingly, procedural justice was significantly positively correlated with job satisfaction and significantly negatively correlated with turnover intentions. Lastly, job satisfaction and turnover intentions were negatively correlated.

### **Procedural Justice, Felt Obligation, and Outcomes**

The first two sets of hypotheses examine the relationship between procedural justice, felt obligation, and the justice outcomes of job satisfaction and turnover intentions. Specifically, Hypotheses 1a and 1b predicted that procedural justice is positively correlated with job satisfaction and negatively correlated with turnover intentions. The results in Table 1 support both parts of Hypothesis 1. Hypotheses 2a and 2b predicted that felt obligation would mediate both of these procedural justice-justice outcome relationships. To test for these mediations, I ran the PROCESS syntax developed by Hayes (2013) and supported by Preacher, Rucker and Hayes (2007). Table 2 supports both parts of Hypothesis 2.

The results of the mediation hypothesis for job satisfaction (Hypothesis 2a) are displayed in Table 2. Model 1 examined the direct effect of procedural justice on the mediator, felt obligation. Results for Model 1 show that procedural justice was a significant predictor of felt obligation,  $b = .82$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p = .000$ . Next, in Model 2, the combined influence of both felt obligation and procedural justice on job satisfaction was investigated. Felt obligation was a significant predictor of job satisfaction,  $b = .53$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p = .000$ . Furthermore, procedural justice was also a significant predictor of job satisfaction,  $b = 1.07$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p = .000$ , and its regression coefficient,  $b = 1.07$ , is smaller in comparison to when felt obligation is not in the regression equation,  $b = 1.51$ . This indicates that the relationship between procedural justice and job satisfaction may be partially mediated by felt obligation. A bootstrap estimation approach of 5,000 samples was used to test the indirect effect of procedural justice on job satisfaction. Testing of the indirect effect showed it was significant,  $b = .44$ ,  $SE = .08$ , 95%  $CI = .30, .60$ . The test was significant because zero is not in the CI. Approximately 62% of the variance in job satisfaction was accounted for by both predictors ( $R^2 = .62$ ). Thus, regression analysis revealed that felt obligation partially mediates the relationship between procedural justice and job satisfaction.

The second mediation hypothesis predicted that felt obligation would mediate the procedural justice-turnover intentions relationship (Hypothesis 2b). Table 2 displays the results of this hypothesis. Again, Model 1 examines the direct effect of procedural justice on the mediator, felt obligation. Model 1 displays that procedural justice was a significant predictor of felt obligation,  $b = .82$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p = .000$ . Next, in Model 2, the combined influence of both felt obligation and procedural justice on turnover intentions was investigated. Felt obligation significantly predicted turnover intentions,  $b = -.35$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p = .000$ , as did procedural justice,

$b = -1.23$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p = .000$ . The regression coefficient for procedural justice when examined with felt obligation,  $b = -1.23$ , is smaller as compared to when felt obligation is not in the regression equation,  $b = -1.52$ . Therefore, felt obligation may partially mediate the relationship between procedural justice and job satisfaction, and Hypothesis 2b was supported. A bootstrap estimation approach of 5,000 samples was used to test the indirect effect of procedural justice on turnover intentions. Testing of the indirect effect showed it was significant,  $b = -.29$ ,  $SE = .08$ , 95%  $CI = -.46, -.15$ . The test was significant because zero is not in the CI. The predictors account for approximately 48% of the variance in job satisfaction ( $R^2 = .48$ ). Hence, regression analyses support felt obligation as a mediator of the procedural justice-turnover intentions relationship.

Thus, Hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported as greater procedural justice is associated with fewer turnover intentions and greater job satisfaction, and felt obligation partially mediates both relationships.

### **Organizational Politics as a Moderator**

Hypothesis 3 predicted that politics would moderate the relationship between procedural justice and felt obligation such that increased politics will decrease felt obligation in the procedural justice-felt obligation relationship. To investigate this moderation, I again used the PROCESS syntax developed by Hayes (2013) and supported by Preacher et al. (2007), along with investigating the main effects using SPSS. Table 3 displays the results in terms of Model 1 and Model 2 (interaction). In the first model, the main effect of procedural justice on felt obligation and the main effect of organizational politics on felt obligation were both found to be significant. These variables accounted for a significant amount of variance in felt obligation,  $R^2 = .37$ . Procedural justice was positively associated with felt obligation and politics was



negatively associated with felt obligation. Then, the influence of politics as a moderator between procedural justice and felt obligation (Model 2) was investigated. The two main effect variables, procedural justice and perceptions of politics were analyzed and found to account for a significant amount of variance in felt obligation,  $R^2 = .37$ ,  $F(2, 291)$ ,  $p = .000$ ; however, the interaction between procedural justice and politics did not significantly predict felt obligation,  $b = .04$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p = .579$ . Thus, even though evidence was found that both procedural justice and perceptions of politics predict felt obligation, no evidence was found to support Hypothesis 3, which stated that politics moderates the relationship between procedural justice and felt obligation,

### **Discussion**

This study examined the relationships between procedural justice, organizational politics, felt obligation, and the outcomes of job satisfaction and turnover intentions. It was hypothesized that procedural justice would have a positive relationship with job satisfaction, and a negative relationship with turnover intentions. Felt obligation was tested as mediator for these two relationships. Finally, organizational politics was hypothesized to be a moderator between procedural justice and felt obligation.

The results of this study offer empirical support for Social Exchange Theory (SET) and felt obligation as a mechanism in justice-outcome relationships. Evidence of felt obligation mediating a procedural justice-job satisfaction relationship, as well as a procedural justice-turnover intentions link, bolsters the concept of felt obligation as a mechanism by which justice supports advantageous outcomes for the employee and organization. Additionally, if politics had had a moderating role in the relationship between procedural justice and felt obligation, then the role of politics would have taken on even more of a practical significance in the workplace. It

would have shown to be an important factor in facilitating or impeding procedural justice, though evidence was not found to support this in the current study.

The results show that procedural justice has a significantly positive relationship with job satisfaction, as well as a significantly negative relationship with turnover intentions. These findings are unsurprising as they replicate previous research (Colquitt et al., 2001). The relationships imply that greater fairness in procedures at work will lead employees to feel more satisfied in their jobs, and less likely to think about leaving their current positions.

Findings also show that felt obligation mediated the relationship between procedural justice and job satisfaction, as well as the relationship between procedural justice and turnover intentions. However, these were partial mediations, as procedural justice was still a significant predictor of both outcomes, even while controlling for the effect of the mediation. This discovery adds to our limited pool of empirical evidence on felt obligation's role in justice outcomes and in SET. In SET, felt obligation has a prominent theoretical role in explaining justice outcomes, but studies on establishing the empirical significance of felt obligation in justice research are lacking (Shannon et al., 2014). Notably, Shannon et al. (2014) found that felt obligation was a significant mediator between organizational justice and work performance. Social Exchange Theory posits that felt obligation is the mechanism by which high levels of justice facilitate advantageous outcomes for employees and organizations, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and withdrawal behaviors (Colquitt et al., 2001). Thus, the current study builds on Shannon et al. (2014) by providing empirical evidence that felt obligation as a mediator for justice-outcome links extends beyond the previously tested justice-performance relationship, to justice-job satisfaction and justice-turnover relationships.

In light of this new evidence, employers might wish to consider ways of augmenting both felt obligation and procedural justice in order to increase positive justice outcomes in their organizations. For instance, employers could promote greater felt obligation by offering workers special amenities such as exclusive discounts to stores just for being a part of the organization. Offering such perks may cause employees to feel as though they owe the organization for these seemingly superfluous benefits, leading employees to reciprocate. To promote perceptions of procedural justice, companies could visibly post policies and workers' rights, while ensuring that such policies and rights are upheld. Such positive outcomes as increased job satisfaction and decreased turnover intentions are supported by the current study, but further research may also show that other justice outcomes such as trust and organizational citizenship behaviors may be affected in ways advantageous to organizations, too (Colquitt et al., 2001). As felt obligation only partially mediates procedural justice and outcomes, it is even more advantageous for companies to foster higher levels of procedural justice and felt obligation in order to maximize the chance of outcomes such as higher job satisfaction, fewer turnover intentions, and better work performance.

Furthermore, this study did not find perceptions of politics to be a significant moderator between procedural justice and felt obligation. This may indicate that politics will not significantly affect the relationship between procedural justice (and other predictors) and felt obligation. Despite this conclusion, politics was negatively correlated to job satisfaction and positively correlated with turnover intentions, indicating that while politics may not interrupt the influence of procedural justice in the way investigated in the current study, organizational politics does not appear to be conducive to a successful workplace. Furthermore, Cropanzano et al. (1997) state that since politics can make a workplace uncomfortable, employees are likely to

disengage and withdraw psychologically. This is further evidence that politics have an important negative impact on employees.

The hypothesized moderating effect of organizational politics may have been insignificant due to the study's methods. Perhaps a robust effect would have occurred if participants had been primed to think about workplace politics more thoroughly. That is, making politics more salient in participant's minds, for example, by having them perform a writing exercise targeting their memories of workplace politics, may have had a stronger effect. Additionally, the survey posed the question "Do you feel that workplace politics in an organization has a positive effect?" and participants were given the option to choose "yes", "no", and "I'm not sure". Posing this item towards the beginning of the survey with the option to say "I'm not sure," could have prompted participants to be more open-minded about the impact of organizational politics rather than viewing politics as they normally would have without such a question. Therefore, this may have weakened the effect size such that the moderation was insignificant.

If the results of this study were different and politics was a significant moderator of procedural justice and felt obligation, then employers would need to pay close attention to politics to ensure that higher levels of politics do not exacerbate problems with felt obligation. Though this study did not find evidence for this, more research should be done to verify that this truly is the case, as it could have powerful implications if the results of this study are in fact an anomaly.

### **Further Implications for Future Research and Practice**

Future research should focus on finding more empirical evidence concerning whether felt obligation is a mediator for other justice-outcome relationships. This includes varying not only

the outcome being tested, but also testing the same outcome with different justice dimensions. Shannon et al. (2014) also suggest that more attention needs to be given to whether it is the organization or supervisor that is being targeted by an employee's feelings of felt obligation or justice perceptions. Furthermore, even though this study failed to find evidence that perceptions of politics has a moderating role between procedural justice and felt obligation, the paucity of existing research on the topic could mean that politics does still have a moderating role between a different type of justice and felt obligation. More research should look into this possibility, as well as the likelihood of politics having a mediating role between justice and felt obligation, rather than a moderating role, as was examined in the current study.

In a practical sense, focusing on justice at work, with an emphasis on increasing felt obligation, could help organizations increase employee behaviors that benefit the organization, as well as save companies money by avoiding costly hiring processes by decreasing turnover intentions, and thus turnover. To do this, employers might try tightening adherence to formal policy in an effort to increase procedural justice perceptions. Likewise, employers could beef up initiatives that support antecedents of felt obligation, such as perceived organizational support (POS; how much employees feel they are valued by the organization; Eisenberger et al., 2001), if employees are reporting high procedural justice but expressing low job satisfaction. Such initiatives to increase POS might include weekly or monthly recognition of employees' achievements and hard work as they pertain to the organization's success. Other avenues by which to manipulate POS, an antecedent of felt obligation, include increasing pay, rank, job enrichment, and influence over policy insofar as employees have a favorable view of changes in these areas (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

The practical implications of this study in term of politics are less clear cut. While no evidence was found to support the hypothesis that organizational politics moderates a procedural justice-felt obligation relationship, this data is still important as little research has been done concerning these concepts together. Learning that politics may not moderate such a relationship informs our perspective on the relationship where previously there was little or no information. For employers, the finding that politics has little or no effect on the procedural justice-felt obligation link could signal that politics is not as important a factor in the workplace. However, employers should keep in mind that politics is still significantly negatively correlated with procedural justice and job satisfaction, as well as associated with higher levels of turnover intentions. Reducing politics may not be the most effective way to enhance the effects of procedural justice and felt obligation, but may work in other ways to impact the organization. Practical ways employers could reduce political behavior in the workplace include striving to adhere to a uniform policy across the organization and increasing the amount of participation employees have in decision-making processes for things like hiring and promotion (Aryee et al., 2004)

Thinking further, the mechanism by which politics would affect felt obligation could be related to trust. In the past, trust has been defined as one's willingness to be vulnerable to another person who is expected to perform an action that will impact oneself, despite being unable to monitor or control that other person's actions (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Aryee et al. (2002) found that trust partially mediated the relationship between procedural justice and work attitudes like job satisfaction and turnover intentions. Research following along these lines might find it useful to look into trust as a mechanism by which politics affects justice and

felt obligation. The results of this type of research could shed more light on the importance of fostering trust between the organization/supervisor and employees.

Lastly, little empirical research has been done in regards to value theory. Even a cursory search using the PsycInfo database yielded no reference to Locke's (1976) value theory beyond textbook chapters. The current research contributes to relieving the paucity of literature in this area by finding a novel avenue (i.e., felt obligation) in support of value theory. Further research is needed to explore felt obligation in its relation to value theory.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

There were several limitations to this research study. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small ( $N = 294$ ), and mostly Caucasian (81.3%), so it was not representative of the general population, though all measures did have adequate reliability. For comparison, Springer, Martini, Lindsey, and Vezich (2016) wrote that according to Amazon, there are over 500,000 registered users on Mechanical Turk. While Mechanical Turk is touted for its greater diversity than college subject pools, nearly four-fifths of participants in this sample were of Caucasian heritage. In regards to the quality of data, even though Mechanical Turk is not perfect, previous research views its use optimistically, and the data it provides meets or surpasses the standards of more traditional ways of gathering data, such as on college campuses (Buhrmester & Gosling, 2011).

Another issue, that may have skewed results, is that 18.8% of respondents believed workplace politics has a positive effect and 22.5% were not sure if workplace politics has a positive effect. Politics is predominantly characterized as a negative influence in the workplace; however, as Yen (2015) showed, politics may not be viewed as negative in all types of workplaces. Additionally, politics may not be perceived in the same way by all workers

(Landells & Albrecht, 2015). Ferris et al. (1989) found that perceptions of politics can vary based on the level of control an employee has in the workplace. Given that over 70% of the sample reported that they were in positions considered “Manager/Supervisor” or “Associate”, this may play in a factor in the sample’s overall perceptions of politics. If a majority of participants were in upper level positions with more control (as opposed to entry level positions which are generally considered less skilled and more expendable), this could have affected the level of politics or their attitudes towards how positive or negative politics is in the workplace. So, perhaps this sample of respondents was not representative enough of the negative connotations that workplace politics usually garners, thus making the effect size of the moderation too small to be significant.

This study is also limited in that broad lenses were used to look at procedural justice and felt obligation. Shannon et al. (2014) found support for emphasizing justice foci. Specifically, Shannon et al. (2014) found that justice and felt obligation have the strongest connection when the justice and felt obligation perceptions converge on the same target (i.e., supervisor versus organization). The current research did not differentiate between justice and/or politics directed at supervisors or organizations. It may be that the results of the mediation analyses (i.e. partial mediation results) are stronger if the targets of procedural justice and felt obligation perceptions are lined up. In addition, perhaps the results for the moderation analyses would have been significant had the relationships between procedural justice and felt obligation been stronger.

In conclusion, this study investigated the relationship between procedural justice, felt obligation, job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and organizational politics. I found that felt obligation partially mediates procedural justice-job satisfaction and procedural justice-turnover intentions relationships. This builds on existing evidence that shows felt obligation mediates



justice-work performance relationships (Shannon et al., 2014). Moreover, this study did not find support for politics as a moderator of a procedural justice-felt obligation relationship. As there is a dearth of empirical studies exploring felt obligation and politics, this research expands our knowledge in a little-known area.

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Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1. POPs</b>	2.75	.92	(.92)				
<b>2. Felt Obligation</b>	5.15	1.23	-.57**	(.87)			
<b>3. Procedural Justice</b>	3.34	.88	-.82**	.59**	(.93)		
<b>4. Job Satisfaction</b>	4.83	1.82	-.67**	.67**	.73**	(.94)	
<b>5. Turnover Intentions</b>	3.63	2.01	.58**	-.54**	-.67**	-.80**	(.90)

Note: N = 294. Measure reliabilities are noted on the diagonal. POPs = Perceived Organizational Politics. POPs and Procedural Justice scales were on 5-point measures. All others (felt obligation, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions) were on 7-point measures.

\*\* p < .01 (two-tailed)

Table 2  
*Mediation Results – Felt Obligation as a Mediator for Procedural Justice – Outcome Relationships*

<b>Models</b>	<b>Variables</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>
		<b>Felt Obligation</b>		<b>Felt Obligation</b>	
<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Constant</b>	2.40**	.22	2.40**	.22
	<b>Procedural Justice</b>	.82**	.07	.82**	.07
		<b>Job Satisfaction</b>		<b>Turnover Intentions</b>	
<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Constant</b>	-1.50**	.30	9.57**	3.91
	<b>Felt Obligation</b>	.53**	.07	-.35**	.09
	<b>Procedural Justice</b>	1.07**	.09	-1.23**	.12

Note: \*\* p < .01 (two-tailed)

Table 3

*Results of Moderation Analysis – Politics as a Moderator of Procedural Justice – Felt Obligation Relationship*

<b>Models</b>	<b>Variables</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>
<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Constant</b>	4.27**	.64
	<b>Politics</b>	-.33**	.12
	<b>Procedural Justice</b>	.54**	.11
<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Constant</b>	4.64**	.92
	<b>Politics</b>	-.45	.24
	<b>Procedural Justice</b>	.43*	.22
	<b>Interaction</b>	.04	.06

Note: \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed), \*  $p < .05$  (two-tailed)