

# A critical appraisal of the scientific dominant approach to organizational justice

## Uma apreciação crítica da abordagem de caráter científico dominante à justiça organizacional

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This article outlines a critical assessment of the notion of justice according to the social-scientific dominant approach to organizational justice (OJ). We argue that the detachment from prescriptive notions of justice, advocated by the dominant approach to OJ, shrinks the ideal of justice to a means at the disposal of organizations in pursuit of their interests.

**Originality/value:** To trigger a critical discussion within the Brazilian academy of business about the inherent instrumental and managerial matters in the production of knowledge in the field of OJ. This work contributes to an ideal reflection on OJ.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This is a theoretical essay based on the articulated consult and interpretation of bibliographic materials regarding the hegemonic concept of OJ obtained through a literature review.

**Findings:** A survey in the OJ literature reveals that the proponents of such a dominant scientific-descriptive approach to justice in the workplace take a dissociation stance from normative notions of justice. In doing so, they favor a descriptive, subjective, functionalist, and positivist understanding of justice. Justice is deflated from its moral value to become an analytical-empirical category, understood as its instrumental-managerial function within the organizational structure. Mainstream OJ studies have nullified the normative ideal of justice by turning it into a resource servile to strategy and organizational performance.

**Keywords:** justice, organizational justice, normative detachment, political value, virtue



## Resumo

**Objetivo:** A proposta deste artigo é apresentar uma apreciação crítica da noção de justiça encapsulada na abordagem de caráter científico-social dominante da justiça organizacional (JO). O argumento que pretendemos endereçar aqui é: o distanciamento de noções prescritivas de justiça, recorrente na abordagem dominante da JO, reduz o ideal de justiça a um meio à disposição das organizações na busca de seus próprios interesses.

**Originalidade/valor:** A possibilidade de desencadear na academia brasileira de administração uma discussão crítica sobre o instrumentalismo e o gerencialismo presentes na produção de conhecimento no campo da JO. Este trabalho contribui para uma reflexão sobre o ideal de justiça nas organizações.

**Design/metodologia/abordagem:** Este é um texto teórico, cuja reflexão se assenta na consulta e na interpretação articulada de material bibliográfico relacionado com a concepção hegemônica da JO, obtido por meio de revisão de literatura.

**Resultados:** Um levantamento na literatura de JO revela uma postura de despreendimento assumida pela abordagem dominante em relação às concepções normativas de justiça. Por conta disso, a noção de justiça assumiu um caráter descritivo, subjetivo, funcionalista e positivista. Como categoria analítico-empírica, a justiça é concebida e compreendida por sua função instrumental-gerencialista dentro da estrutura organizacional. Como consequência, os estudos de justiça nas organizações têm sido acusados de converter o ideal de justiça em um recurso servil à prerrogativa da estratégia e do desempenho organizacional. De fato, esse distanciamento anulou e desperdiçou o valor do significado normativo desse ideal.

**Palavras-chave:** justiça, justiça organizacional, distanciamento normativo, valor político, virtude



## INTRODUCTION

This essay outlines a critical appraisal of the social-scientific approach prevailing in organizational justice (OJ) studies. Whereas a well-established academic field of inquiry (Rhodes, 2016), OJ focuses on comprehending individuals or groups' perceptions or judgments of fairness in work environments (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015; Cropanzano et al., 2016; Greenberg, 2009). Since its inception, the mainstream OJ scholarship has deliberately attempted to detach itself from normative conceptions of justice. These set out what should be done to fulfill fairness requirements in society (Rhodes, 2016). In effect, organizational scholars put forward a descriptive, subjective<sup>1</sup>, functionalist, and positivist perspective of justice (Assmar et al., 2005; Blanchet et al., 2013; Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014; Kim & Donaldson, 2018; Skitka & Wisneski, 2012).

Such a dissociating maneuver of the OJ field from prescriptive notions of justice seems paradoxical at best and contradictory at worst. OJ social-scientific studies are epistemically rooted in Western philosophical ideas of justice and fairness (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Cropanzano & Molina, 2015; Cropanzano & Stein, 2009; Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014; Greenberg & Bies, 1992; Moliner et al., 2017). Regardless, organizational scientists have intentionally neglected this philosophical foundation to build up their conceptions of justice in the workplace (Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014; Rhodes, 2016), which were supposed to be better adjustable and applicable to understand justice issues in the organizational setting (Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014).

In the social-scientific approach to OJ, this rejection of the philosophical thought has compromised a wide array of theorizations about fairness issues in organizations (Rhodes, 2011; Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014). In particular, the predominant notion of OJ has been criticized for offering an impoverished understanding of the ideal of justice (Rhodes, 2016; Cropanzano et al., 2017). Indeed, most OJ studies have distorted the purpose and, consequently, the applicability of normative notions of justice in the field of organizational studies (Rhodes, 2011; Van Buren III, 2008). Organizational scholars have,

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<sup>1</sup> The subjective issue refers to the psychological grounds of justice in the dominant social-scientific approach to organizational justice (OJ). Therefore, it does not concern the pursuit to understand individuals' subjectivity per se, which is often a commitment of qualitative research. Thus, OJ research does not base its theorizing on normative principles of justice, that is, those which indicate moral norms of fair conduct in society. Instead, it relies on its notion of workplace justice according to people's perception of fairness.





therefore, undervalued such ideal by embracing an eminently subjective understanding of justice (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015) blended with a managerial bias (Van Buren III, 2008). As a result, justice became an empirical-analytic category subservient to the prerogative of organizational performance (Fortin & Fellenz, 2008; Van Buren III, 2008). Moreover, under the aegis of the hegemonic approach to OJ, some of its theorists are accused of nullifying and wasting justice's moral value favoring instrumental rationality of fairness (Cropanzano & Stein, 2009; Rhodes, 2016). Drawing upon an analytical literature review on OJ, the argument we seek to defend is that the detachment from prescriptive notions of justice, advocated by the dominant approach in this academic field, shrinks the justice ideal to a mere resource at the disposal of organizations to pursue their instrumental and, thereby, economic interests.

The discussion in this paper is divided into four sections. Following this introduction, the first section depicts the normative notion of justice in business ethics (BE) literature, aiming to map its differences with the social-scientific notion of justice according to OJ scholarship. The second section outlines the descriptive approach to OJ, highlighting its main characteristics. The third section examines the reasons for the abovementioned detachment and its consequences for the understanding of justice. Finally, the last section critically appraises the hegemonic approach to justice in organizations.

## **A SUCCINCT INTERPRETATION OF THE NORMATIVE APPROACHES TO JUSTICE IN BUSINESS ETHICS**

In the eyes of many social scientists and, in particular, organizational theorists, justice falls into the category of dense ethical concepts, that is, those which combine facts and values (Alzola, 2011; Cropanzano et al., 2016). Within the OJ literature, studies in business ethics (BE) tend to adopt normative accounts of justice, as philosophers and social justice scholars proclaim (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015; Cropanzano & Stein, 2009; Rhodes, 2016). Normative approaches articulated in philosophical theories aim “[...] to prescribe ‘what justice must be’” (Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014, p. 435).

Philosophical-normative theories conceive justice as a value from which it is possible to determine: 1. what a fair action is; 2. what a fair society is; 3. what a fair person is (Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014). In the canons of these theories, the principles underlying justice indicate fair standards of conduct, which are morally acceptable in society (Cropanzano & Stein, 2009).





This approach is, thus, concerned with comprehending how truly fair acts are configured. From this perspective, justice is an objective matter (Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014) that is justified “[...] necessarily by reference to particular standards of conduct defined from objective sources, such as religious, legal or political authorities” (Assmar et al., 2005, p. 443). Put differently, justice is a virtue, to be specific, a central moral value for the achievement of conceptions of the common good, well-being, and good life in society, whose purpose is to turn the world into a fairer and more equitable place (Cropanzano & Stein, 2009; Hosmer & Kiewitz, 2005; Rhodes, 2016).

In light of the BE literature, the concept of justice denotes a kind of moral correctness or ethical adequacy (Cropanzano et al., 2007). Notwithstanding, the idea of justice is applied to grasp a vast range of human outcomes, processes, and behaviors (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015; Kurdoglu, 2020), BE scholars are concerned with moral judgments contents and criteria for establishing what is right or wrong in organizational settings (Greene, 2013). Regarding fairness in organizations, these academics are far more interested in knowing if individuals address normatively correct judgments about processes, results, or behaviors in a morally appropriate manner (Cugueró-Escofet & Rosanas, 2013; Kurdoglu, 2020).

For normative perspectives of OJ, individuals require guidelines, norms, and rules to judge moral orders. These judgment components provide the basis from which someone can assess their behavior to act reasonably in a given situation (Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014; Cropanzano et al., 2016). Cropanzano and Ambrose (2015) remark that people need some moral grounding to appraise the fairness of their interpersonal affairs. Justice assessments demand a set of normative standards, presumably stored in memory and capable of activation for everyday use (Cugueró-Escofet & Rosanas, 2013). Indeed, everyone often compares patterns of moral conduct to actual or potential everyday events. If there is a mismatch between what should have been done – i.e., specified by normative standards – and what was done – i.e., specified by the actual behavior –, then the fairness of a decision, that is, the sense of fairness, will likely be questioned (Van der Toorn et al., 2010).

In the BE field, justice involves applying a set of moral principles whose purpose is to recommend how someone should behave towards others (Fortin & Fellenz, 2008). Justice’s moral component cannot be reduced to economic biasing (Cropanzano & Moliner, 2013; Kim & Donaldson, 2018). Nevertheless, individuals are sometimes prone to egocentrically confuse moral judgments with economic favoring (Kim & Donaldson, 2018). Therefore, eco-





conomic value is not the only measure human beings use in social relationships (Fiske, 1991; Kim & Donaldson, 2018). As Folger and Salvador (2008) inform, something ought not to be considered fair simply because it provides an economically favorable result. Instead, it can be fair, regardless of whether its outcomes turn out to be good or bad (Folger & Salvador, 2008; Kim & Donaldson, 2018).

It is hard to deny that the conception of justice in the workplace has clear normative meanings in the BE studies. Furthermore, as suggested above, this normativity is imbricated in the dominant approach to OJ. However, from a social-scientific perspective, studies on justice in organizations have endorsed an eminently psychological, descriptive, and empirical stance of justice, which distances itself from its philosophical-prescriptive notions. The following section offers the contours and nuances of the social sciences' hegemonic approach to OJ.

## **UNVEILING THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE DOMINANT SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE**

In the social sciences, OJ is a recent phenomenon. Its earliest conceptualizations date back to the seminal works of George Caspar Homans, Peter M. Blau, J. Stacy Adams, Elaine Walster, Ellen Berscheid and G. William Walster, and John Thibaut, Laurens Walker, Stephen LaTour, and Pauline Houlden. In the eyes of many organizational commentators, these publications are the cornerstones of the notion of justice in the OJ literature (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014). Inspired by them, social-scientific OJ research proliferated between the 1960s and the 1970s (Colquitt et al., 2005; Cropanzano & Molina, 2015). During this period, scholars aimed to empirically test a vast range of justice's normative propositions derived from such works in different organizational contexts (Colquitt et al., 2001; Colquitt et al., 2005; Cropanzano & Stein, 2009; Greenberg, 1987).

Despite the significance of those magnum opuses in crystalizing the notion of justice in organization studies, its social-scientific meaning is credited to the works of Jerald Greenberg (Ambrose et al., 2015; Colquitt, 2012; Colquitt et al., 2005; Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2015; Cropanzano & Molina, 2015; Cropanzano & Stein, 2009). Greenberg (1987, 1990, 2009) specifies the descriptive, subjective, positivist, and empirical boundaries to the ideal of justice in organizations. With the rise to prominence of this dominant approach to justice, social and organizational scholars have scru-





tinized individuals' perceptions and assessments of justice in various organizational situations (Colquitt et al., 2005; Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2015; Cropanzano & Stein, 2009; Cropanzano et al., 2007; Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014; Jesus & Rowe, 2014; Moliner et al., 2017; Rego, 2000; Van Buren III, 2008). As Assmar et al. (2005, p. 443) comment, there is still a concern amongst OJ scholars

[...] in demonstrating the crucial role that values, beliefs, and feelings about what is fair or unfair play in human actions. Sociopsychological studies on justice have revealed that judgments on what is fair and merited, concerning rights and duties, and right and wrong, underlie people's feelings, attitudes, and behaviors in their interactions with others.

Mainstream OJ inquiries emphasize the “[...] subjective meanings of justice – what individuals perceive as fair and unfair and how such perceptions are self-explained [...]” (Assmar et al., 2005, p. 443). The concept of OJ has mainly been articulated to justify the “[...] dynamics of subjective fairness perceptions in the workplace [...]” (Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014, p. 435). Therefore, OJ proponents of the social-scientific account conceive justice as an eminently subjective experience (Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014). As Rhodes (2016, p. 2109) states, OJ research evoked the concept of justice to describe “[...] individual and subjective perception [...] that an event in the workplace is fair [or unfair]”.

Beneath the umbrella of the social-scientific approach, OJ studies have taken a descriptive stance towards the notion of justice (Neri, 2018). Such a perspective is grounded on individuals' perceptions of justice in organizational environments (Colquitt et al., 2005; Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2015; Moliner et al., 2017; Yean & Yusof, 2016). Social scientists aimed to grasp what is considered fair accordingly to people's perception, whilst members of an organization (Rhodes, 2016). Unlike the normative approach that specifies fairness from objective standards, the OJ's descriptive viewpoint concentrates on apprehending how individuals judge whether an organizational event is morally fair or unfair, based just on their perceptions of justice (Colquitt et al., 2005; Cropanzano & Molina, 2015; Moliner et al., 2017). The social-scientific account of OJ centred its research agenda on investigating “[...] the psychological mechanisms by which people render judgments of fairness, as well as their responses to these perceptions” in organizational environments (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015, p. 379). As a result, the assessment of justice became a matter of individuals' cognitive and



emotional processing of work-related events, their attitudinal and behavioral reactions to injustice, and, finally, their sense of fairness while attending workgroups and organizations (Rupp et al., 2015; Sousa & Mendonça, 2009).

This subjective character of justice has enabled OJ academics to reason that people's judgments can be empirically evaluated through quantitative research<sup>2</sup> (Colquitt & Shaw, 2005; Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2015; Greenberg, 2009). To do so, social and organizational scholars have applied the following maxim standpoint: once justice is subjectively perceived, it can be measurable (Colquitt & Shaw, 2005; Rhodes, 2011). Furthermore, the positivist attitude of OJ studies aspired to explain the causes and predict the effects of (in)justice in organizational contexts (Cropanzano et al., 2007). In so doing, they seek to explain how employees assess and react to certain organizational events to decipher the impact of justice and other central aspects of human behavior, such as satisfaction and stress at work (Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014; Fiuza, 2010; Rego, 2000).

Concerning the subjective-descriptive approach to OJ research, the normative ideal of justice was diminished to a relevant variable estimated in quantitative models (Ambrose et al., 2015; Colquitt et al., 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2016; Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014; Mendonca et al., 2003; Rhodes, 2016; Van Buren III, 2008). According to Colquitt et al. (2001, 2005) and Moliner et al. (2017), OJ scholars devoted their efforts to building theoretical models that foreshadowed justice's antecedents, consequences, mediators, and moderators in the workplace. These blueprints have empirically verified the validity of justice measures applied to explain organization matters. In particular, OJ academics have identified and highlighted the function and conceptual distinctions between three types of subjective perceptions of justice in the workplace: 1. distributive justice; 2. procedural justice; and 3. interactional justice (Colquitt et al., 2005; Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2015; Cropanzano & Molina, 2015; Cropanzano et al., 2016). These constructs, respectively, refer to different modes of fairness, that is: 1. "[...] the fairness of outcome distributions or allocations [...]" (Colquitt et al., 2001, p. 425); 2. "[...] the fairness of the procedures used to determine outcome distributions or allocations [...]" (Colquitt et al., 2001, p. 425); and 3. "[...] the fairness of the treatment individuals receive during the enactment of procedures [...]" (Ambrose et al., 2015, p. 109).

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<sup>2</sup> Social-scientific studies of OJ are, eminently, functionalist and positivist. Due to this epistemic and paradigmatic perspective being rooted in most propositional-theoretical texts and OJ quantitative research, it is understandable why scholars advocate for quantification instruments to measure individuals' perception of justice in organizational settings.

Over the past two decades, several meta-analytic surveys have been carried out in the OJ literature (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001, 2013; Hauenstein et al., 2001; Whitman et al., 2012). They have developed and validated the measures to assess the connections between those constructs aforementioned. The meta-analyses compiled the outcomes of several OJ scientific studies aiming at 1. analyzing causal relations among those constructs and their respective variables; 2. adjusting the antecedents, consequences, moderators, and mediators of theoretical frameworks; and 3. establishing the role of such justice constructs and their effects on individuals and organizations through hypothetical testing (Cohen, 2015; Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2015). The findings of such research elucidate the importance of these three constructs in comprehending the perceptions of justice and their impact on individual behavior and organizational performance (Cohen, 2015; Cropanzano & Molina, 2015).

Rooted in the subjective and empirical quality of that descriptive account of justice, scholars developed a standardized body of managerial knowledge about OJ (Ambrose et al., 2015; Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014; Kim & Donaldson, 2018; Greenberg, 1990, 2009). The relevance of justice for the field of organization studies lies in its empirical outcomes and, in particular, its potential to predict human attitudes and behaviors in organizational structures (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015; Cropanzano et al., 2016). Indeed, OJ research implies that subjective assessments of fairness hold the prospect to foresee individuals' reactions to various organizational decisions (Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014) and outcomes (Colquitt et al., 2001; Bouazzaoui et al., 2020). Under those circumstances, as Rhodes (2016) remarks, the managerial OJ studies set forth the benefits of perceived justice to organizations. As claimed by Colquitt et al. (2001), high levels of fairness improve organizational processes in so far as 1. facilitate the implementation of management changes; 2. increase managerial authority; 3. reduce the employee's perception of exploitation in the workplace; and, finally, 4. persuade individuals to be more aligned with the organization's culture and identity.

In conjunction with these benefits, several OJ scholars offered much evidence on how favorable perceptions of justice positively influence the attitudes and behaviors of workers in organizations. For instance, the sense of justice increases organization members' motivation and well-being (Fortin, 2008; Fiuza, 2010). In addition, it encourages organizational citizenship behaviors (Rego, 2000; Singh & Singh, 2019). Justice also improves task performance (Zapata-Phelan et al., 2009; Fiuza, 2010). Furthermore, it



enhances employees' performance evaluations (Korsgaard & Roberson, 1995) by encouraging self-evaluations (Schroth & Shah, 2000). Besides, justice favors organizational commitment (Jang et al., 2019; Rego, 2004) and trust (Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Mittal et al., 2019), since it promotes cooperation among employees (Tyler & Blader, 2000). It also settles down the terms for conflict resolution (Shapiro & Brett, 1993), reducing work stress levels (Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2019). Consequently, justice improves individuals' job satisfaction (Lambert et al., 2020).

These benefits unveil a managerialism ideology imbricated in the social-scientific account of OJ. One that discloses the presence of instrumental rationality, functionalism with an economic bias, crafting the ideal of justice in the workplace (Hosmer & Kiewitz, 2005; Kim & Donaldson, 2018; Van Buren III, 2008). Justice is an instrumentalized means to achieve organizational ends, whether increased job satisfaction, organizational commitment, profitability, conflict reduction, management trust, and competitive position, for instance (Rhodes, 2016). It does not seem unreasonable to claim that this approach to OJ stands on the following assumption: justice must be at the organization's service, business strategy, and performance (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Fortin, 2008; Van Buren, 2008).

Explained the silhouettes of justice in the social sciences' dominant approach to OJ, the upcoming section explains how the development of its notion of justice moved away from normative portrayals.

## **THE PHILOSOPHY DISTANCE EMBRACED BY THE DOMINANT APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE**

Considering the argument advanced so far, social-scientific OJ studies have borrowed normative ideals of justice from Western philosophy to place them into the kernel of organizational theory and practice (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Cropanzano & Stein, 2009; Rhodes, 2016). In particular, OJ mainstream literature alludes to the Aristotelian and Rawlsian accounts of justice (Ambrose et al., 2015; Colquitt et al., 2001; Kim & Donaldson, 2018; Van Buren III, 2016) and, more recently, to Emmanuel Levinas' theory of justice, to name a few examples (Ambrose et al., 2015; Colquitt et al., 2001; Kim & Donaldson, 2018; Van Buren III, 2016). As stressed by Rhodes (2016, p. 2468), philosophical works are typically cited, albeit in passing, in publications on justice in the workplace "[...] with reference being largely limited





to either ancient Greek philosophers (e.g., Plato and Aristotle), or modern Americans ones (for example, Nozick and Rawls)”<sup>3</sup>.

The OJ theoretical development has lineages in the distributive justice narrative from the 1960s onwards (Colquitt et al., 2005; Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2015). It represents the first wave of justice in organizations studies. The Aristotelian tradition grounds their theorization. This wave puts forwards the notion of fair distribution stemming from Aristotle (Bryce & Cropanzano, 2001; Rhodes, 2016). Although such a notion was initially thought to address the issue of justice in political communities, some social scientists suggested that this concept could also be applied to organizations (Colquitt et al., 2005; Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2015; French, 1964). The second wave of OJ publications focuses on procedural justice (Colquitt et al., 2005; Cropanzano et al., 2016). In the 1980s, OJ approaches took on a Rawlsian perspective, changing their focus of analysis “[...] to include the process of justice as well as its outcome” (Rhodes, 2016, p. 2109). Drawing upon John Rawls’ theory of justice, “[...] ethicists (business and otherwise) have been seeking to bring fairness-oriented arguments to bear on analyses of organisational practices” (Van Buren III, 2016, p. 1429). The procedural logic of Rawlsian justice was introduced by Thibaut and Walker (1975, 1978).

This brief review of these two waves illustrates that OJ historical concepts of justice – i.e., distributive, procedural, and interactive – were structured following normative rules brought forth by philosophy (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015; Cropanzano et al., 2016). Cropanzano and Molina (2015, p. 379) state that “[...] seminal thinking on procedural justice was taken from John Rawls, and work on distributive justice traces back (at least) to Aristotle”. According to Rhodes (2016), the conceptual framework of justice studies in organizations is profoundly indebted and infused with prescriptive approaches to justice. Normative notions of justice echo in the discussions regarding the conception of OJ and notably in 1. the formulation and refinement of its concepts; 2. its link with morality; and 3. its contemporary applications in organizations (Cugueró-Escof & Fortin, 2014; Cropazano et al., 2017; Fortin & Fellenz, 2008; Moliner et al., 2017; Van Buren, 2008). In practical terms, this means that social scientists borrow philosophical concepts of justice to create their own understanding of OJ (Cropanzano &

<sup>3</sup> The following philosophical approaches are part of OJ studies: John Rawls’ theory of justice as fairness (Lindblom, 2011), Aristotle’s notion of justice as a virtue (Rhodes, 2016), Robert Nozick’s theory of justice (Chan, 2000), Emmanuel Levinas’ concept of justice (Rhodes, 2011), Amartya Sen’s idea of justice (Shrivastava et al., 2016), Jürgen Habermas’s notion of social justice (Underwood-Stephens & Cobb, 1999), and Friedrich Hayek’s theories of justice and the rule of law (Kurdoglu, 2020).



Molina, 2015). This pattern of theoretical development is still present in the majority of OJ publications (cf. Bouazzaoui et al., 2020; Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014; Folger & Stein, 2017; Rhodes, 2016).

Notwithstanding OJ scholars acknowledge the role of philosophical thought in the workplace justice theorizing, a panoramic survey in the OJ literature reveals the presence of a hegemonic discourse, whose scientific-descriptive bias relegates the value of prescriptive theories of justice (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Rhodes, 2016). Such demerit put in effect by the social-scientific account of OJ unveils its ambivalent relation with philosophy. On the one hand, mainstream OJ studies rely on normative approaches to justice to advance their theories (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015; Fortin & Fellenz, 2008). On the other, OJ proponents have undervalued their philosophical heritage (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Rhodes, 2016). Organizational scientists have a widespread disinterest in engaging with normative notions of justice advanced by philosophers (Van Buren III, 2008). Even when aware that philosophical concepts of justice matter, OJ researchers tend to approach them descriptively (Cropanzano & Molina, 2015). In other words, social scientists focus on describing perceptions rather than developing prescriptive notions of justice in the workplace (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Cropanzano et al., 2017). In contrast to philosophy and BE studies, OJ dominant discourse advocates descriptive approaches to fairness to replace normative portrayals of justice (Greenberg & Bies, 1992; Moliner et al., 2017).

In summary, OJ proponents present two interrelated reasons to justify such detachment. The first one refers to the scope divergence in the approaches to justice brought forward by social sciences and philosophy. The former embraces a primarily descriptive approach, which describes people's attitudes and behaviors towards justice. Therefore, its notion of justice concentrates on what individuals believe is fair (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Greenberg & Bies, 1992). In comparison, the latter is interested in developing normative explanations of justice to establish standards of moral evaluation on what is fair or unfair (Colquitt & Shaw, 2005; Cropanzano & Molina, 2015). The second reason rests on a somewhat disdainful and derogatory belief that prescriptive concepts of justice hold a reductionist attitude regarding the world, given the human nature complexity revealed by empirical research (Greenberg, 2009; Greenberg & Bies, 1992).

What is curious about the mainstream approach to OJ is how organizational scholars and other behavioral scientists have deliberately and explicitly distanced themselves from the normative roots of philosophical thinking about justice (Ambrose et al., 2015; Cropanzano & Stein, 2009; Rhodes, 2016). The justification for this lies in the unfounded assumption that "[...]



[u]nlike the work of philosophers and attorneys, managerial scientists are less concerned with what is just and more concerned with what people believe to be just” (Cropanzano et al., 2007, p. 35). The critical point of divergence between philosophers and social scientists on justice is clear. Philosophers share a standard prescriptive orientation, conceiving justice as a normative ideal. Social scholars embrace a descriptive stance, whose conceptualizations do not focus on justice as it should be, but on how individuals perceive it (Colquitt et al., 2005). This disagreement reveals a bifurcation that is present in the OJ literature: “[...] [t]he philosophical approach to studying business ethics is inherently prescriptive [...], whereas the approach of social scientists is primarily descriptive” (Greenberg & Bies, 1992, p. 433). While philosophers are interested in providing prescriptive or normative definitions of justice, OJ is a perceptual cognition for social scientists (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Rhodes, 2016). This maneuver of distinguishing themselves from philosophy has enabled social scientists to describe the objectivity of justice perceptions in organizational contexts (Rhodes, 2016).

This stance of detachment and differentiation from normative approaches to justice accentuated the OJ’s theoretical limitations and conceptual inconsistencies (Cropanzano & Stein, 2009; Cugueró-Escofet & Fortin, 2014). Such distancing adopted by the social sciences perpetuates a disqualification of the normative nature of philosophy. For example, Greenberg and Bies (1992) evaluated ethical theories, including utilitarian and deontological ones, in relation to the empirical findings of the social-scientific studies on OJ. According to the authors, “[...] the underlying philosophical premises [of these theories] were concluded to be overly simplistic in view of the complexities about human nature revealed in empirical research” (Greenberg & Bies, 1992, p. 433). This passage illustrates the belief in a certain explanatory superiority of social scholars – when contrasted to philosophers – regarding the appreciation of justice in organizations. Indeed, empirical research allows scientists to suspend their judgments and understand the complexity of the phenomenon of justice.

The indifference to philosophical ideas of justice has yielded severe criticisms about the dominant approach to OJ. There is a singular flaw in the arguments presented by social sciences: although their central concept of justice is rooted in philosophical thinking (Cropanzano & Stein, 2009), the OJ approach has not given “[...] adequate or explicit or deliberative attention to the philosophy” (Rhodes, 2016, p. 2105). In the urge to erect a body of knowledge on what justice is, OJ researchers have institutionalized a series of questionable assumptions and false dichotomies, which have not been scrutinized. In the social-scientific OJ literature, philosophical





approaches to justice have been mainly referenced in a limited and problematic manner at best or a completely absent one at worst (Rhodes, 2016). In the next section, we outline how some of the objections have compromised the normative ideal of justice.

## **A STANDPOINT AGAINST THE SERVITUDE OF JUSTICE IN THE SCOPE OF ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE**

This article calls into attention the perils of assuming a justice's managerial orientation endorsed by the social-scientific approach to OJ. Notably, we outlined a critique of its descriptive, subjective, and functionalist-instrumental orientation towards managerialism to the ideal of justice (Van Buren III, 2008). The crucial matter of OJ ambivalence, which distances it from philosophical-normative ideas of justice, is embracing an ethically impoverished notion of fairness in workplace contexts (Rhodes, 2016). The immediate consequence of such a theorizing route was offering a portrayal of justice unconcerned with its potential impact on social change. In doing so, justice ceases to be a central pillar for a fair society – one in which the organization must be accountable.

The mainstream OJ literature disregard the ethical-political component of the philosophical-normative notions of justice in at least three interrelated manners. First, it individualizes an inherently social ideal. Subsequently, it disregards the patterns of moral conduct and normative standards of behavior supporting individuals' perceptions of fairness. Lastly, this literature instrumentalizes the ideal of justice, turning it into something subservient to the managerial imperative. The paramount concern of social-scientific OJ researchers is to develop psychological-quantitative models suitable for better understanding of employees' discernments, experiences, and reactions regarding what is fair or unfair in workplace events. Empirical OJ studies have demonstrated how objective determinations of justice may positively affect people's attitudes and actions in organizational situations.

There is an intrinsically Machiavellian trait in the subversive way social-scientific OJ research manipulates perceptions of distributive, procedural, and interactive justice to the organization advantage, particularly to achieve – and thereby improve – its economic order ends (Cohen, 2015; Kurdoglu, 2020). The abandonment of the philosophical-normative notions of justice represents a depoliticization of its meaning as an ultimate end all seek. The managerial rationality diminishes the idea of justice to a business tool, whose primary purpose is to perpetuate organizational power, imperatives,





and prerogatives and instrumental reasoning. Justice loses its quality as a virtue of human beings in their relations with others whose interactions promote a good life for the organization's members and society.

At odds with the OJ's hegemonic concept of justice, some scholars evoke an ethical thought about justice in the workplace. Proponents of this perspective champion the moral and political value of justice. The normative manner philosophy conceives justice may pose a route to question justice's managerial instrumentalism embodied by the mainstream OJ literature (Rhodes, 2016). For example, Hosmer and Kiewitz (2005) and Fortin and Fellenz (2008) stress that OJ scholarship ought to contemplate: 1. the moral role played by justice in organizations and 2. their responsibilities in providing a fair internal environment to their employees and, thereby, a fair society. In conformity with this, Van Buren III (2008) states that OJ academics must ponder the domestication of justice non-economic rationales. Cohen (2015) pleads that principles of justice should not only be relevant to organizations' economic needs since they also impose moral obligations on managers' decisions and behaviors. According to the ideal of justice, if organizations cannot protect the interests of citizens, society will not to be fair (Cohen, 2015).

To address this ethical account of justice, we suggest OJ scholars to assume that an organization is a morally diverse community (Lazega, 2020). It has multiple genuine values, moral claims, concepts of the common good, and ends – most are incompatible and often incommensurable. Communities and organizations are social entities holding a participatory and inclusive *ethos* wherein people can cooperate to secure mutually beneficial agreements (Lazega, 2020). In light of this, we offer two guiding questions for future OJ research endeavors:

- How do different philosophical-normative concepts of justice respond to the problem of social cohesion in organizational environments of profound plurality and conflicting values?
- How can a concept of justice be a principle of practical rationality for resolving moral conflicts in organizations?

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