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## INTERACTIONAL JUSTICE AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE WORK BEHAVIORS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

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Perceptions of interactional justice have been shown to explain why employees engage in counterproductive work behaviors (CWB; Bies, 2005). However, the processes involved in this relationship have yet to be clarified. In this study, we drew on the cognitive theory of emotions and extended work published on the mediating role in this relationship (Fox & Spector, 1999) by conducting a survey with insurance company employees ( $N = 187$ ). Data analyses confirmed that CWB are significantly predicted by both low perceived interactional justice and negative emotions. In addition, 2 significant mediation effects were observed: (a) perceived anger mediates the relationship between low perceived interpersonal justice and active CWB, and (b) perceived fear mediates the relationship between low perceived informational justice and passive CWB. The theoretical and organizational implications of these findings are discussed.

*Keywords:* counterproductive work behaviors, interactional justice, organizational justice, fear, anger.

Why do employees engage in counterproductive work behaviors (CWB)?  
What reasons can explain employees performing below their skill levels,

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taking sick leave without really being ill, or purposely falsifying their expense accounts? In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest in CWB among organizational researchers. A large part of this work has been directed toward validating the integrity tests that human resources departments use to identify, and avoid hiring, counterproductive employees (Peterson, Griffith, Isaacson, O'Connell, & Mangos, 2011).

Other authors have focused on determining the causes of these behaviors (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hodson, 2004). In one of the most influential approaches, researchers have examined CWB from a cognitive and motivational perspective (Bies & Tripp, 1996) and suggested that CWB are the result of low perceived justice within the organization (see the meta-analyses published by Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Yee, 2001). This approach leads to a more complex conceptualization that draws its inspiration from the cognitive theory of emotions, according to which CWB is considered as emotion-based responses to organizational environmental conditions (Chen & Spector, 1992; Fox & Spector, 1999; Spector, 1975; Storms & Spector, 1987). From this perspective, the role of negative emotions would appear to function as a mediator of the relationship between low perceived organizational justice and CWB. However, very few researchers have examined the role particular emotions play in specific behaviors, such as aggression or absenteeism (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; VanYperen, Hagedoorn, Zweers, & Postma, 2000). In this study, we integrated the cognitive approach to emotions in order to test the mediating role of the specific negative emotions of anger and fear in the relationship between perceived organizational justice and specific active and passive CWB.

### **The Nature of CWB**

CWB were defined by Spector and Fox as "*volitional acts that harm or are intended to harm organizations or people in organizations*" (2005, p. 151). They include overt actions (such as aggression and theft) as well as more passive actions (such as purposely failing to follow instructions or doing work incorrectly). CWB have been described in a number of ways, including organizational aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Neuman & Baron, 1997; Spector, 1975), incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), antisocial behavior (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997), deviance (Hollinger, 1986; Robinson & Bennett, 1995), and retaliation (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). The common underlying theme is that these behaviors harm the organization by directly affecting its functioning or property, or by impacting on employees in a way that reduces their effectiveness. A number of researchers (Buss, 1961; Conlon, Meyer, & Nowakowski, 2005) have identified two distinct types of CWB and/or relationships between CWB and individual

and organizational variables: active CWB (e.g., theft, aggression, sabotage) and passive CWB (e.g., withdrawal behaviors, incivility). These two types of CWB were investigated in this research.

### **The Relationship between Perceived Interactional Injustice and CWB**

The term *organizational justice* refers to *perceptions of fairness and evaluations concerning the appropriateness of workplace outcomes or processes* (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005). The construct is composed of three dimensions: *distributive justice* (Adams, 1965), which describes *the perceived equity in rewards and contributions between oneself and others*; *procedural justice* (Thibaut & Walker, 1975), which is *an evaluation of the fairness of the criteria applied during the decision-making process*; and *interactional justice*, which is *the perception of equity in the relationships between superiors and employees* (Bies & Moag, 1986).

Greenberg (1993) suggested conceptualizing interactional justice in two dimensions: informational justice and interpersonal injustice. *Informational justice* refers to *the accuracy and quality of received information, whereas interpersonal justice describes the quality of interpersonal interactions* (e.g., dignity and respect, truthfulness and propriety), particularly those between hierarchical superiors and their subordinates. Among the standard forms of justice perceptions, researchers have identified interactional justice as playing a prominent role in the emergence of CWB (for a review see Nadisic, 2008). Because the elements of interactional justice are more prevalent in the daily work environment than are the elements described in procedural and distributive justice dimensions, employees evaluate organizational exchanges on the basis of interactional justice rather than using either procedural or distributive justice criteria. This explains why, among the three types of organizational justice, low perceived interactional justice has been identified as the strongest predictor of violent behaviors in the workplace (Bies, 2005). In addition, Bies clearly demonstrated that the dimension of interactional justice facilitates the mechanism of external blame attribution, because the source of justice is easy to identify (e.g., a coworker or a hierarchical superior). Numerous studies have been conducted to test the validity of this approach, to the extent that perception of low interactional justice stands out as one of the central factors in explaining CWB (e.g., Bies & Tripp, 1996; Jawahar, 2002; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997).

The impact of perceived justice on CWB has generated increasing interest among researchers. Several empirical studies have been conducted in which it has been confirmed that perceptions of low interactional justice are related to verbal aggression directed toward coworkers or superiors and to a decrease in

employee commitment (e.g., VanYperen et al., 2000). The results from a content analysis of over 100 sabotage reports written by employees (Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002) indicate that when interactional injustice is identified as the main cause of the sabotage, the acts of sabotage are directed not only toward other employees but also toward the organization as a whole. These results bring to light the predictive nature of low perceived interactional justice as it relates to a variety of active CWB. A laboratory experiment confirmed the causal link between low interactional justice and CWB (Burton, Mitchell, & Lee, 2005). Participants who read a low interactional justice scenario stated that they would have engaged in both active and passive CWB more often than did the participants who read a high interactional justice scenario. Based on this literature, the following hypothesis was formulated:

**Hypothesis 1:** Active and passive CWB will be linked to low perceived overall interactional justice.

In other words, we expected that low perceived interactional justice scores would be significantly correlated to higher self-reported CWB, in that individuals who perceived lower interactional justice would admit to engaging in more active and passive CWB more often.

### **The Mediating Role of Negative Emotions on the Relationship between Interactional Injustice and CWB**

Negative emotions play a central role in the interactional justice process (Krehbiel & Cropanzano, 2000; Mikula, Scherer, & Athenstaedt, 1998). Skarlicki and Folger suggested that “the anger and resentment associated with perceptions of unfair procedures may energize individuals to engage in retaliation” (1997, p. 435). Many scholars have pointed out the predictive role of negative emotions in producing CWB, in that they increase the likelihood, or facilitate the production, of CWB, such as “a need to let out, or to express, one’s feelings of indignation, anger, or frustration” (Robinson & Bennett, 1997, p. 18). Therefore, negative emotion variables such as fear and anger may explain why individuals engage in CWB. Because emotions are the immediate response to situations that are perceived as unfair (Lazarus, 1991; Lovullo, 1997; Payne, 1999), and because they energize and motivate subsequent behavior and physiological change (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997; Spector, 1988), it is possible that emotions mediate the relationship between perceived injustice and CWB. Fox and Spector (1999) found evidence of emotions mediating the relationship between organizational constraints and CWB. These authors suggested a model to explain the relationship between the perceptions of the organizational situation (i.e., justice, frustration, constraints) and engaging in CWB through the perception of emotions. In other research, it has also been suggested that negative emotions may be a mediator

of the relationship between organizational injustice and CWB (e.g., Fox et al., 2001; Van Yperen et al., 2000). In this study, our aim was to contribute to this field of research by testing the role of negative emotions as an intermediary in the relationship between perceived interactional injustice and CWB. Therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated:

**Hypothesis 2:** Perceived interactional justice will be negatively correlated with the measure of negative emotions.

In other words, we expected that high scores for perceived interactional justice would be linked to low self-reported negative emotions, so employees who had a more positive perception of interactional justice in their working environment than did their workmates would not score high for negative emotions:

**Hypothesis 3:** Negative emotions will be positively correlated with CWB.

In other words, we expected that high scores for self-reported negative emotions would be linked to high scores for self-reported CBW, so individuals who reported more negative emotions would also admit to engaging in more CBW.

**Hypothesis 4:** Negative emotions will mediate the relationship between perceived interactional justice and CWB.

In other words, we expected that individuals who perceived lower interactional justice in their environment than did their coworkers would engage in CWB after experiencing negative emotions.

### **Active and Passive CWB and the Approach-Avoidance Motivational System**

Over the past two decades, the approach-avoidance motivational system has been the focus in a number of studies as a crucial element in the understanding of organizational behavior. This line of research is not new (Miller, 1944; Miller & Dollard, 1941), but it has recently come to the fore. Varying terms are used in different fields to refer to the model: *approach*, *incentive*, and *appetitive* motivational system are used interchangeably. The motivational approach system is a method of describing and organizing behaviors that support action toward desired incentives. In this study, we measured such behaviors with the active CWB variable. The aversive system, on the contrary, is used to organize behaviors involved in avoiding threats. The labels *aversive*, *threat*, and *avoidance* or *withdrawal* motivational system are also used interchangeably. In this study, we measured this category of behaviors with the passive CWB variable. Oatley and Johnson-Laird (1987) emphasize that, within the approach-avoidance motivational system, each specific emotion activates a specific behavior. In this study, we focused on the impact of two specific emotions – anger and fear – on the prediction of active and passive types of CWB. More specifically, we

addressed the relationship of these emotions to broad motivational tendencies of approach and avoidance, and we considered the possibility that these negative emotions may play the role of mediator in the relationship between interactional injustice and specific active and passive CWB.

According to the cognitive theory of emotions, each negative emotion is an early indicator of a specific behavioral response linked to either an approach or avoidance motivational strategy. For instance, anger often promotes efforts to change others' behavior and remove the violation of what "ought" to be (Fischer & Roseman, 2007), or reopen the path toward the desired goal (Frijda, 1986). The aim in these strategies is to achieve a particular desired condition, rectify an injustice, or create discomfort for someone else (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987). Thus, anger promotes efforts to inflict pain or harm on offenders and is linked to active CWB, such as sabotage, theft, or aggression. Whereas anger is a reaction to the actual occurrence of an aversive situation, fear is produced when there is anticipation of an aversive situation in the future, or of the given context becoming aversive in some way. Fear may protect the individual from impending danger, as it instigates defensive behavior that is associated with the fight or flight response (Cannon, 1929). Avoidance behaviors occur when an individual is trying to postpone an aversive situation or prevent it from occurring (Kanfer & Phillips, 1970). This type of behavior takes the form of passive CWB, such as absenteeism, in the context of the workplace. The link between fear and avoidance has been examined in health research (e.g., Lethem, Slade, Troup, & Bentley, 1983; Phillips, 1987; Vlaeyen & Linton, 2000; Waddell, Newton, Henderson, Somerville, & Main, 1993), but not in organizational contexts. In the light of this literature, we formulated the following two hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 5:** Anger will mediate the relationship between perceived interactional justice and active CWB.

In other words, we expected to find that individuals perceiving lower levels of interactional justice would engage in active CWB only if they were experiencing anger.

**Hypothesis 6:** Fear will mediate the relationship between perceived interactional justice and passive CWB.

In other words, we expected to find that individuals perceiving lower levels of interactional justice would engage in passive CWB only if they were experiencing fear.

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

Participants were employees in a multinational insurance company and were recruited from branch offices in Milan, Italy; Istanbul, Turkey; and Paris, France.

Respondents were initially contacted via a letter informing them that a study was being conducted for academic research purposes in an effort to improve the understanding of some of the issues that affect people at work. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. A week later, survey packets were hand-delivered in the morning by a researcher and hand-retrieved by the researcher at the end of the same day. A sealable envelope was included in each packet to ensure confidentiality. Employees were not compensated for their participation in the study. Of 470 surveys delivered, 187 surveys were returned, for a 40% response rate; 40.8% of the respondents were male and 59.2% were female. The average age of the respondents was 39 years ( $SD = 9.16$ ). In terms of length of service with the company, 49% of respondents had less than six years work experience and 51% of participants had six or more years work experience.

### Measures

**Interpersonal and informational justice.** Specific justice perceptions were assessed using scales developed by Colquitt (2001). Interpersonal justice was measured using four items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ): sample item "Overall, our supervisors treat us with respect". Informational injustice was assessed using five items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ): sample item: "In my department, information is provided in detail". For all items, individuals responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

**Negative affect.** We used 10 items from the Gaudreau, Blondin, and Sanchez (2003) Negative Affect Scale (NAS) to measure negative affect. Respondents used a 5-point scale to assess mood-related adjectives (ranging from 1 = *very slightly or not at all* to 5 = *extremely*) indicating how they generally felt at work. The NAS consists of two emotion scales (i.e., fear and anger). Fear was assessed using five items: sample item "I feel stressed" and anger using five items: sample item "I feel irritated". Scale reliabilities were Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$  for fear and  $.77$  for anger.

**CWB.** CWB were measured using 12 items from the more comprehensive scales developed by Marcus, Schuler, Quell, and Hümpfner (2002). The internal consistency for the scales was acceptable: active CWB Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ , sample item: "Stolen something at work", and passive CWB Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ , sample item: "Come to work late without making excuses". Participants were asked how often they had engaged in these behaviors during the last 12 months. Items were rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 = *never* to 7 = *daily*.

### Statistical Analysis

Data were first analyzed to obtain information about simple statistically significant relationships between variables (correlation coefficients). In order to test the mediation hypotheses, we computed a series of regression equations

as prescribed by Baron and Kenny (1986). According to this approach, three relationships between the target variables must be demonstrated to establish a basis for testing mediation: the independent variable must predict both the dependent and the mediator variable and the mediator must predict the dependent variable. Once these conditions are established, the dependent variable is regressed onto the independent variable and the mediator in a final regression analysis.

## Results

No statistically significant differences were observed among the three national groups in the sample in terms of the demographic variables.

### Correlational Analyses

The results of the correlational analyses are shown in Table 1. As predicted in Hypothesis 1, the interactional justice scores, that is, interpersonal and informational, were both negatively correlated with active CWB scores ( $r = -.26$  and  $r = -.27$  respectively,  $p \leq .01$ ). However, Hypothesis 1 was only partially confirmed because only informational justice scores were significantly and negatively correlated to passive CWB scores ( $r = -.17$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ). Interpersonal justice scores were not related to passive CWB ( $r = -.09$ ,  $p = ns$ ). In addition, as predicted in Hypothesis 2, the scores for the two negative emotions of anger and fear were both significantly and negatively correlated with interpersonal (anger  $r = -.30$  and fear  $r = -.34$ , respectively,  $p \leq .01$ ) and informational justice scores (anger  $r = -.21$  and fear  $r = -.24$ , respectively,  $p \leq .01$ ).

Moreover, as predicted by Hypothesis 3, the scores for anger and fear, were positively correlated with active CWB scores ( $r = .45$ , and  $r = .34$ , respectively,  $p \leq .01$ ). However, Hypothesis 3 was only partially confirmed because only fear scores were related to passive CWB ( $r = .50$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ). Anger scores were not significantly correlated to passive CWB ( $r = -.14$ ,  $p = ns$ ).

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Coefficients

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Anger	1.93	.63	-				
2. Fear	2.22	.69	.46**	-			
3. Interpersonal justice	3.66	.95	-.30**	-.34**	-		
4. Informational justice	2.91	.95	-.21**	-.24**	.44**	-	
5. Passive CWB	1.36	.48	.14	.50**	-.09	-.17*	-
6. Active CWB	1.28	.35	.45**	.34**	-.26**	-.27**	.45**

Note:  $N = 187$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ .

Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6 predicted that negative emotions would mediate the relationship between perceived interactional justice and active and passive CWB. Support for mediation is obtained by demonstrating that the effect of the independent variable (interactional justice) on the dependent variable (e.g., active CWB) is significantly reduced when accounting for the effect of the hypothesized mediator (e.g., anger). The results of these analyses are shown in Figure 1. As reported above, interpersonal justice had a significant negative effect on anger (the mediator),  $\beta = -.30$ ,  $t(185) = -4.41$ ,  $p < .001$ , and active CWB (the dependent variable)  $\beta = -.26$ ,  $t(185) = -3.738$ ,  $p < .001$ . A third regression analysis established that anger was a significant predictor of active CWB,  $\beta = .45$ ,  $t(185) = 6.96$ ,  $p < .001$ . Finally, when the active CWB test was regressed onto both interpersonal justice and anger, the effect of interpersonal justice was reduced but remained a significant predictor of active CWB,  $\beta = -.13$ ,  $t(185) = -2.015$ ,  $p = .045$  whereas anger remained significant in the equation,  $\beta = .41$ ,  $t(185) = 6.055$ ,  $p < .001$ . A Sobel test of the reduction in the interpersonal justice effect was significant ( $Z = 5.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ), providing support for the hypothesis that interpersonal justice interferes with active CWB by reducing anger.

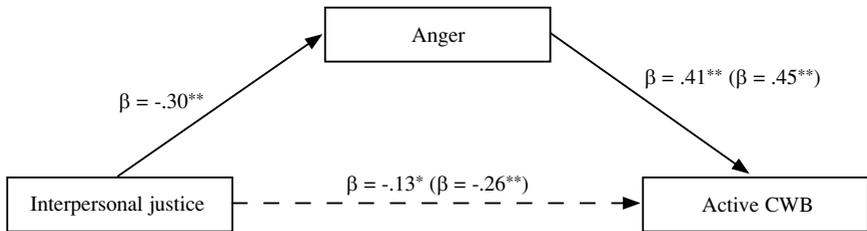


Figure 1. Tests of anger as a mediator of interpersonal justice effects on active CWB.

Note: \*  $p = .045$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ .

As reported above, informational justice had a significant negative effect on fear,  $\beta = -.24$ ,  $t(185) = -3.43$ ,  $p < .001$ , and passive CWB,  $\beta = -.17$ ,  $t(185) = -2.349$ ,  $p < .05$ . A third regression analysis established that fear was a significant predictor of passive CWB,  $\beta = .50$ ,  $t(185) = 8.023$ ,  $p < .001$ . Finally, when the passive CWB test was regressed onto both informational justice and fear, informational injustice was no longer a significant predictor of passive CWB,  $\beta = -.049$ ,  $t(185) = -.747$ ,  $p > .45$ , whereas fear remained significant in the equation,  $\beta = .49$ ,  $t(185) = 7.587$ ,  $p < .001$ . A Sobel test of the reduction in the informational injustice effect was significant ( $Z = 4.167$ ,  $p < .001$ ), providing support for the prediction that informational injustice interferes with passive CWB by reducing fear (see Figure 2). These two mediation results partially support Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6.

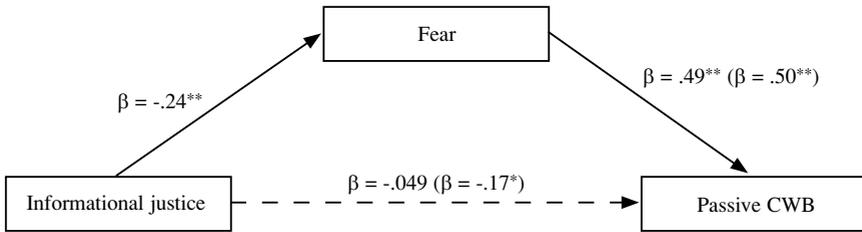


Figure 2. Tests of fear as a mediator of informational justice effects on passive CWB.

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

Our aim in this study was to contribute to the line of work on the predictors of CWB and apply the assumptions of the cognitive theory of emotions to this field. Initially, we tested the role of low perceived interactional justice in predicting active and passive CWB. In a second step, we examined the variables that could mediate this relationship. We tested the mediating role of negative emotions (anger and fear) in the relationship between low perceived interactional justice and engaging in active and passive CWB. According to the literature, interactional injustice is an important predictor of CWB (see e.g., Fox et al., 2001; VanYperen et al., 2000) and our data tend to support the mediating role of negative emotions on that relationship. The integration of predictions based on the emotional cognitive theory allows for a better explanation of the processes leading employees to engage in CWB. We found that negative emotions, specifically anger, play a mediating role in the relationship between perceived interpersonal injustice and active CWB, meaning that, when people feel that they are being treated unfairly they feel angry, which leads them to overt motivational reactions, such as verbal aggression, sabotage, and theft. We also found that fear is a mediating variable in the relationship between low perceived informational justice and passive CWB, indicating that individuals who feel that they do not have satisfactory access to information at work feel afraid, leading them to engage in aversive behaviors (such as absenteeism and taking repeated breaks). These results are consistent with previous findings and the assumptions of the cognitive theory of emotions (e.g., Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Frijda, 1986; Vlaeyen & Linton 2000).

Furthermore, our data analyses confirmed the fundamental role of anger in predicting active behaviors and of fear in predicting passive withdrawal behaviors, corroborating the observations reported by Fox et al. (2001) that the emotions of hostility and fear mediate the relationship between low perceived organizational justice and CWB. Future researchers could further determine the impact of negative emotions in this context, in particular with reference to the

stressor-emotion model developed by Spector and Fox (2005). This model takes into account organizational constraints, injustice, and stressors, and it would be instructive to test whether or not negative emotions can mediate the impact of each of these factors in explaining CWB.

Our results show that the relationship between CWB and the two dimensions of interactional justice are explained by different processes and each generates distinct CWB. We observed that the perception of unfair interpersonal treatment generates anger, which predicts more active CWB. On the other hand, the perception of not being well informed activates feelings of fear, which, in turn, can predict withdrawal reactions, or, in other words, passive CWB. These findings can be interpreted to indicate that when people feel that they lack sufficient access to quality information, they may also feel afraid of being excluded by their colleagues, their managers, and the organization (Lipiansky, 1993). Problems related to poor access to information could be seen as involving more serious problems that, in turn, are perceived as threats. The fear of being rejected by the group may lead to withdrawal behaviors, not in terms of wishing to not be rejected by others, but in rejecting others in advance.

To conclude, our results in this study suggest that each dimension of perceived interactional justice sets off a specific emotion leading to specific, distinct types of CWB. These results should be tested again in future projects. In the applied organizational context, our findings indicate the importance of managing emotions in the workplace. Employees who are better able to manage their fear could be expected to engage less in withdrawal strategies, such as passive CWB. Similarly, employees who are able to control their anger could be expected to engage in active CWB, such as theft or assault, less frequently. It has been suggested that low perceived justice is an organizational inevitability, be that through managerial decisions made on distributive justice criteria, or through perceptual biases on the part of employees (Brockner, 2006). Dealing with perceptions of injustice and the negative emotions they provoke involves key emotional intelligence capacities, such as the identification of one's own emotions and their influence, as well as the management of negative emotions in the specific environment (Goleman, 1998). Cropanzano, Weiss, Suckow, and Grandey (2000) proposed an integrative model of emotions related to injustice and illustrated how coping becomes more costly for employees who use emotion-focused coping strategies (such as hostility, accusing others, or seeking revenge). On the other hand, coping strategies focused on problem-solving support and the management of emotional reactions were found to be more cost-effective. The notion of organizational resilience is also of central significance to coping with low perceived justice. Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (1995) proposed that in order to foster resilient reactions to organizational stressors managers should focus on sense-making, that is, the process by which people give meaning to experience.

Bies and Tripp (1998) showed that, when faced with a situation of organizational unfairness, employees may adopt CWB (organizational retaliation) or constructive behavior, such as making a deliberate decision to forego anger, resentment, and the desire to punish the person responsible for the prejudice (Murphy, 1988). The term reinvestment is used to describe the behaviors that occur when employees who feel that they have been treated unfairly attempt to restore or reconstruct the damaged relationships (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). The development of emotional intelligence, efficient environmental stress reduction, problem-focused coping, and increased resilience through sense-making, are all instrumental in creating a situation in which employees who perceive that there is little justice in their workplace resort to behaviors of reinvestment instead of CWB.

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