
Ryan J. Schmiesing
Interim Leader, Program & Volunteer Risk Management
Ohio State University Extension, 4-H Youth Development, The Ohio State University
2120 Fyffe Road, 25 Agricultural Administration Building
Columbus, OH 43210-1084 USA
E-mail: schmiesing.3@osu.edu

R. Dale Safrit
Associate Professor & Extension Specialist
Department of 4-H Youth Development
North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension
Campus Box 7606, Raleigh, NC 27695-7606 USA
E-mail: dale_safrit@ncsu.edu

Joseph A. Gliem
Associate Professor
Department of Human and Community Resource Development, The Ohio State University
2120 Fyffe Road, 208 Agricultural Administration Building
Columbus, OH 43210 USA
E-mail: gliem.2@osu.edu

Abstract

This descriptive-correlational study investigated Ohio State University Extension county agents’ perceptions of, and relationships between, organizational justice (including distributive, procedural, interactional, and systemic justice) and job satisfaction. The researchers used a census of O.S.U. Extension county agents and a mailed questionnaire to collect data from them in February 2002. The final response rate was 86%. The findings suggest that O.S.U. Extension county agents have a somewhat uncertain perception of organizational justice; agree with procedural and interactional justice; disagree with distributive and systemic justice; and are very satisfied with their employment. A low, positive association was found between O.S.U. Extension county agents’ perceptions of organizational justice and current level of job satisfaction. Positive relationships were found between job satisfaction and interactional justice, procedural justice, and systemic justice. The findings suggest that O.S.U. Extension administration should investigate and strengthen reward structures and continue to offer opportunities for employees to be engaged in dialogue and decision-making, while encouraging individual creativity in program development and implementation.
Introduction

Ohio State University (O.S.U.) Extension has been in existence for nearly 100 years, serving the needs of Ohio citizens through a variety of community-based educational programs focused in 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences, agricultural and natural resources, and community development. In the current state of economic uncertainty, rapid and complex change has been a constant for O.S.U. Extension, like most other Cooperative Extension Systems.

A complicating factor in the management of O.S.U. Extension is the autonomy of individual employees in a large and complex system and their evolving roles and responsibilities, coupled with the flexibility afforded to supervisors when carrying out their administrative responsibilities. For the past several years, O.S.U. Extension has prepared for and now faces many challenges including: Balancing budgets under extreme fiscal constraint; addressing pay equity among individual employees; supporting employees balancing workloads and work/life issues; encouraging and assisting in the promotion and tenure review process; and supporting the tremendously complex and unique county agent position as they develop and implement innovative and unique educational programs.

During such challenging times, it is only natural that Extension employees could find themselves questioning organizational decisions and how they are made, frequencies and effectiveness of communications between administrators and employees, and individual rewards and incentives. All of these potential employee reactions are addressed in the concept of organizational justice.

In perhaps the most simplistic terms, organizational justice involves peoples’ perceptions of fairness in the organizational setting or workplace (Byrne & Cropanzano, 2001; Greenberg 1987). It is an evaluative judgment by individuals of the fair treatment by others (Bazerman, 1993; Furby, 1986) and a fluid concept that involves actions, interactions, and perceptions of individuals and groups. Organizational justice in a broader sense also refers to individuals’ and groups’ perceptions of the fairness of treatment received from organizations, including their behavioral reactions to such perceptions (James, 1992).

Most recently, Beugre’ (1998) stretched the definition of organizational justice to “the perceived fairness of the exchanges taking place in an organization, be they social or economic, and involving the individual in his or her relations with superiors, subordinates, peers, and the organization as a social system” (pp. xiii). Beugre’ and Baron (2001) suggested that organizational justice be considered in relation to (a) interaction with others in the organization (interactional justice), (b) the organization as a system (systemic justice), (c) the fairness of organizational rewards (distributive justice), and (d) formal organizational procedures utilized (procedural justice).

While several authors have investigated the concept of organizational justice within for-profit organizations (Beugre’, 1998; Beugre’ & Baron, 2001; Lind & Taylor, 1988; Rahim, Magner & Shapiro, 2000), minimal research has been conducted to investigate perceptions of organizational justice of Extension county agents. Kutilek (2002) investigated organizational justice as it relates to work/life guidelines within O.S.U
Extension. Additionally, researchers have critically analyzed levels of job satisfaction in Extension organizations over the years (Boltes, Lippke, & Gregory, 1995; Bowen, Radhakrishna, & Keyser, 1994; Keffer, 1976; Mallilo, 1990; Miller, 1997; Nestor & Leary, 2000; Riggs & Beus, 1993). However, no study has been conducted that investigated relationships between current perceptions of organizational justice and levels of job satisfaction and selected personal, professional, and organizational characteristics of O.S.U. Extension county agents.

**Purpose and Research Methods**

The purpose of this research was to describe O.S.U. Extension county agents’ perceptions of organizational justice and job satisfaction. Additionally, the research explored relationships between agents’ perceptions of organizational justice and job satisfaction. Utilizing descriptive-correlational research methodology, the researchers developed a mailed questionnaire to collect data. The four-section research instrument consisted of: Section I: 35 items adapted from Beugres’ (1998) organizational justice instrument (including individual constructs of distributive, interactional, procedural, and systemic justice), each measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree); Section II: 14 items measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) that comprised Warners’ (1973) job satisfaction instrument. Two additional sections, one measuring initiation and participation of continuing professional education and another collecting demographic data were included. Summated scores were used to obtain descriptive statistics of mean, median and standard deviation.

The researchers conducted a pilot test with 18 members of the Ohio Extension Agents Association to establish reliability of the instrument. Using pilot test data, the researchers calculated Cronbach’s Alpha to measure respective constructs’ internal reliabilities as indicators of the instrument’s reliability; resulting individual construct reliabilities ranged from .87 to .95. The researchers used a census of O.S.U. Extension county agents consisting of 284 individuals. They achieved a final response rate of 86% (246 respondents) following two follow-up reminders and one additional mailing to late respondents. Data were collected during February 2002. Because statistical analyses indicated no significant differences between on-time and late respondents, on selected demographics, the researchers did not follow-up with the 38 non-respondents.

**Findings**

Respondents had an overall mean score of 3.08 (sd .71) for their perception of organizational justice (Table 1) with mean scores for individual constructs of distributive, procedural, interactional systematic justice ranging from 2.49 to 3.61. Respondents had a rather high level of job satisfaction with a mean of 4.13 (sd .64) on a five-point scale.

A low, positive association was found between O.S.U. Extension county agents’ perceptions of organizational justice and current level of job satisfaction (Table 2.) Overall, a positive relationship was found between organizational justice (.199) and job satisfaction. Additionally, positive relationships were found between job satisfaction and interactional
justice (.235); procedural justice (.155); and systemic justice (.215). Using Cohen’s effect size suggestions (.5 large; .3 medium; and .1 small), the researchers would suggest that the relationships between organizational justice (including individual constructs) and job satisfaction are small.

Table 1

*O.S.U. Extension county agents’ perceptions of organizational justice and job satisfaction*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Potential Min/Max</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distributive Justice</td>
<td>1.00/5.00</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactional Justice</td>
<td>1.00/5.00</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural Justice</td>
<td>1.00/5.00</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systemic Justice</td>
<td>1.00/5.00</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Justice</td>
<td>1.00/5.00</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>1.00/5.00</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Relationships between O.S.U. Extension county agents’ perceptions of organizational justice and job satisfaction*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Job Satisfaction</th>
<th>Davis Convention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Justice</td>
<td>.199</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=246)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributive Justice</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=246)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interactional Justice</td>
<td>.235</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=246)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural Justice</td>
<td>.155</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=246)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systemic Justice</td>
<td>.215</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=245)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusions and Implications

Agents’ Perceptions of Organizational Justice

The numerous, rapid changes that have occurred within O.S.U. Extension have had direct impacts on county agents, and have ultimately impacted Extension volunteers and program participants. As O.S.U. Extension experiences continual change and seeks to address the many challenges that such a large organization encounters, it is important and necessary to understand perceptions of organizational justice and current level of job satisfaction. Ultimately, based on these perceptions, organizational leaders must ensure that employee needs are being met, potentially ensuring their long-term commitment to the organization.

Distributive justice refers to the distribution of decision outcomes broadly defined; however, the researchers believe that respondents focused predominantly upon the distribution of salaries or other financial outcomes since this section’s initial question was related to salary. Thus, considering Ohio’s current fiscal crisis and, more specifically, the financial outlook for O.S.U. Extension, the researchers were not surprised by the respondents’ low perceptions of distributive justice. In 2001, all O.S.U. Extension employees received only a minimal salary increase ($395) intended to cover additional parking and medical benefits expenses. Other than financial rewards of salary, O.S.U. Extension administrators struggle to identify meaningful rewards of merit for county Extension agents due, in part, to the tremendous size, scope and diversity of the organization. The researchers further suspect that the perception exists within the organization that Extension administrators determine salary increases based more upon an egalitarian philosophy rather than individual performance. The organization establishes a baseline salary increase with everything above being merit; unfortunately, the percentage above the baseline is very minimal, in most cases.

O.S.U. Extension administrators have made extensive attempts to offer additional financial incentives to county agents by funding continuing professional development activities and travel, paying professional dues, and establishing competitive grants supporting innovative program development and agent specialization. However, the researchers suggest that the respondents do not consider this additional support as offsetting perceived inequities in salary. Furthermore, in the months preceding data collection, the innovative grants program was eliminated, and travel and professional development budgets reduced due to the state fiscal situation.

Respondents’ relatively positive perceptions of interactional justice may be expected in an organizational culture where high levels of interaction, at various levels, are evident. During the past five years, O.S.U. Extension administrators increased efforts to foster communication in the organization by soliciting and considering county agents’ direct input into statewide issues affecting them locally. Additionally, county Extension agents may be more frequently or extensively participating in electronic communications or face-to-face meetings, viewing and participating in satellite updates, reading communiqués from administrators or program area leaders, or participating in any number of active task forces, teams, or committees that are contributing to organizational decisions.

While individuals may perceive the actual rewards that are distributed as unfair, they
may perceive the procedures used to determine those distributions as fair (Greenberg, 1996). Although O.S.U. Extension county agents did not perceive the distribution of rewards as fair, they did perceive the procedures used as relatively fair. Within O.S.U. Extension, there have been increased efforts to better communicate procedural and policy information by creating an Extension administration Web site, and through direct verbal and written communications. Therefore, employees have not only had more opportunities to read, reflect upon, and better understand how decisions have been made, but have also been provided increased opportunities to ask questions and seek clarifications. Finally, in some cases, county Extension agents are directly involved in the development of new policies and procedures.

Similarly, the researchers are not surprised by respondents’ relative agreement towards procedural justice. Greenberg (1993) noted that it is somewhat difficult to separate interactional and procedural justice as they relate closely. During the past several years, O.S.U. Extension administrators have placed increased emphases on engaging employees, representing all program areas and positions, in meaningful roles related to the organization’s future. These efforts have resulted in a recognized increase in the numbers of county Extension agents serving on statewide task forces, organizational committees, or leadership teams providing managerial input and direction to specific programmatic and/or organizational issues. Serving on one of several committees or task forces offers county Extension agents opportunities to not only have a voice in the process of decision-making, but also to have direct input into potential or real outcomes that result in new policies, procedures and guidelines. However, while respondents may perceive that they are provided opportunities for input into decisions affecting them, the researchers would argue that respondents’ perceptions of both interactional and procedural justice should have been even more positive considering the emphasis placed on engaging county Extension agents in task forces, committees, and teams. They would question whether respondents’ relatively positive perceptions of both interactional and procedural justice are indicative of O.S.U. Extension’s clan culture described by Berrio (1999.)

The rather low perception of systemic justice may be the result of the many, conflicting subsystems that produce and distribute potentially inaccurate and inconsistent information (Beugre’, 1998) within the O.S.U. Extension structure. Organizations are social systems in which individuals have “norms, values, shared beliefs, and paradigms of what is right and what is wrong, what is legitimate and what is not and how things are done” (Bennis, 1989, p. 30). In a large and complex organization such as O.S.U. Extension, informal and formal groups and subsystems may be sending simultaneous yet conflicting or incongruent messages that could either support or undermine the image that a specific individual has about the organization (Thompson & Luthans, 1990). Within O.S.U. Extension, individuals who comprise these groups and subsystems essentially determine, based on past experiences, other individuals’ perceptions of how the organization operates in terms of what is communicated and how it is communicated.

The fact that respondents had a relatively low perception of systemic justice should be reason for concern for O.S.U. Extension administrators. Respondents may have perceived that organizational decision-makers do not have complete or accurate information and are thus not consistent in applying decision outcomes. This overall negative perception of the fairness of the system could be detrimental to the organization in both retaining current county Extension agents and attracting quality agent candidates for vacant positions. Current
county Extension agents may not provide a very positive overall picture of the organization based on their perceived treatment.

Agents’ Current Level of Job Satisfaction

The relatively high level of job satisfaction of O.S.U. Extension county agents may be explained by the work roles of the individuals. Vroom (1964) suggested that individuals’ job satisfaction is directly related to the extent their jobs provide them with rewarding outcomes such as pay, variety of stimulation, consideration from their supervisor, opportunity for promotion, interaction with co-workers, opportunity to influence decisions that will directly influence them, and control over their pace of work. The researchers conclude that the relatively high level of current job satisfaction may be explained by the presence of several work roles in O.S.U. Extension identified by Vroom. Working for O.S.U. Extension offers employees interaction with co-workers, a variety of types of stimulation, opportunity to influence decisions, and control over their pace of work.

O.S.U. Extension county agents have many opportunities to interact with peers through formal and informal networks. County agents have formal mentors that are assigned when starting in the job, have informal mentors who they have identified, and participate within a network that they often self-identify with based on personal interests, similar county program, or geographic location. Informal or formal mentoring and networking opportunities allow for a tremendous amount of communication between employees. Additionally, many county agents participate on subject matter teams, committees, or task forces that allow them to interact with peers and establish professional relationships that further offer opportunities for ongoing communication about program development, implementation, and evaluation.

O.S.U. Extension county agents have unique opportunities within their county to engage in a variety of programs on a regular basis, work with diverse populations, and directly see the impact they are having on clientele. Extension county agents may work with very traditional types of programs (small family farms, resident camping or nutrition education) one day; and the very next day be engaged in challenging discussions or program development efforts focusing on rural land use issues, grant writing to support after-school programs, teaching financial management courses, or assisting with attracting large business to improve economic conditions of the community. County agents taking advantage of the vast opportunities in their communities are likely more satisfied as new and innovative programs stimulate their creative thinking and challenge them (Vroom).

There are many opportunities for O.S.U. Extension county agents to be actively involved in decisions that directly affect their everyday work responsibilities. Extension county agents are directly involved in decision-making processes through their responsibilities as county chair or co-chair, supervising program assistants, volunteers or other employees, and through their leadership positions in professional associations. It is very common for county agents to be invited to be a member of a task force or committee that will potentially impact their future responsibilities. Participation in each of these committees or task forces allow county agents to provide input and recommendations on potential impact that future decisions might have, therefore influencing how or if decisions are made. Furthermore, the autonomy offered O.S.U. Extension allows county agents’ to make their own decisions in terms of daily tasks and projects.
The Extension county agent position is very autonomous, allowing individuals to make key decisions that affect the development, implementation, and evaluation of educational programs. While the agent must work with a number of stakeholders when developing programs, it remains up to the individual agent to determine their degree of participation, level of responsibility they want to accept, and manner they choose to complete their tasks. Supervisors do not, on a regular basis, require county agents to work at a predetermined pace and develop or participate in a minimum number of programs each year. Essentially, the pace at which employees work or accomplish program goals is determined by the individual county agent.

Relationship Between Organizational Justice and Job Satisfaction

As Extension county agents’ perceptions of organizational justice become more positive, their levels of job satisfaction increase. Although perceiving rewards as unfair, O.S.U. Extension county agents gain satisfaction from other sources, including the manner in which policies are developed and the level of communication and involvement. Several studies have confirmed the impact of justice on job satisfaction. Specifically, Folger and Konovsky (1989) confirmed that the positive perceptions of distributive and procedural justice led to satisfaction. Additionally, several researchers have noted the importance and impact of procedural justice on satisfaction (Alexander & Ruderman, 1987; Lind & Tyler, 1988). The researchers suggest that Extension county agents derive at least some satisfaction from interaction (e.g., opportunity for voice, participation in decision-making timely feedback) and procedures (e.g., how policies, procedures, and rules are put into place) that are in place in the organization. Furthermore, in terms of systemic justice, Extension county agents’ job satisfaction increases, as they perceive the overall organization, including the structures and processes in place, to be fair.

The culture that exists within O.S.U. Extension is one that supports interaction, communication, consensus, commitment and loyalty. Berrio (1999) found that O.S.U. Extension, like a large majority of higher education institutions, is a clan culture. The clan culture is viewed as a friendly place to work, where individuals share a lot of themselves with each other through interaction at various levels and in various forms. Within the clan culture, there exists a high level of commitment among employees; tradition and loyalty are important; and an emphasis on individual development, morale, teamwork, participation, and consensus. Like other large organizations, there also exist other, less dominant cultures within O.S.U. Extension, including hierarchy, market and adhocracy cultures.

Recommendations

1. Recognizing that O.S.U. Extension is not able to compensate at a level that is considered fair by employees, administrators, including county chairs, should identify additional methods to reward employees. Administrators should consider additional financial support for travel to professional conferences, meetings, or workshops; support in the form of start-up money for program development; new technologies or equipment for individual agents; one-time monetary rewards for outstanding program development; increased stipends for agents’ assuming additional roles or responsibilities due to county vacancies; and additional vacation or flex-time options.
2. Extension administration should continue open communication with Extension county agents, both new hires and longer-term employees, especially during volatile, organizational change. In an effort to increase communication, members of central administration, specifically the Director of Extension and Assistant Directors, should visit individual county offices; district directors and district specialists should increase their visibility and dialogue in counties, outside of performance evaluations; state specialist and other state-level program staff should refine strategies to interact with Extension county agents.

3. O.S.U. Extension must critically analyze how the support team concept is being implemented in each district, recognize and adjust for the significant differences, and then require a consistent implementation of the support team concept to help ensure consistent and appropriate support for Extension county agents. The basis for strengthening the support team concept and developing a consistent approach in all districts should be based on the eight constructs developed by Fourman, Ludwig, and Stitzlein (1994) and investigated by Zoller and Safrit (1999). Zoller and Safrit found seven of the eight constructs as important. The support team concept is important to county agents however the inconsistencies with the process are potentially detrimental to the organization.

4. O.S.U. Extension should form a task force, including county, district, and state representatives, to review and revise Extension county agent performance evaluation procedures. The performance evaluation process should be consistent across the organization and county situations for Extension county agent positions (faculty, and administrative and professional) based on their overall responsibilities as this would help ensure fairness in the process (Beugre’, 1998). Support team members involved in the performance evaluation process (county chair, district specialist, district director) should be trained on implementation of the process and county agents should be informed of the expectations of the performance evaluation process.

5. O.S.U. Extension should engage and challenge employees having doctoral degrees or extensive and successful program development and implementation experiences to take full advantage of their education, experience, and knowledge. The organization should identify these individuals to lead subject matter teams, provide special study assignments to further develop their knowledge and skills; offer opportunities to collaborate with Extension specialists to develop workshops and in-services; and offer part-time statewide special assignments to take advantage of expertise currently not available on a statewide basis.

6. O.S.U. Extension should develop and implement a marketing and promotion plan that effectively communicates successful O.S.U. Extension county programs to internal and external stakeholders to increase recognition of employees, ultimately drawing increased support from multiple sources, including potential program participation, program partners, and new funding agencies that would supplement existing financial support, ultimately providing more resources for programming.
7. O.S.U. Extension should evaluate the impact of having multiple communication sources delivering multiple messages to Extension county agents’ and identify consistent methods that most effectively deliver the message from the source(s) of knowledge. O.S.U. Extension administrators should balance technology delivered information with face-to-face delivery to meet the needs and expectations of employees. O.S.U. Extension should place priority on an annual, multi-day, face-to-face statewide organization conference that includes employee recognition, discipline specific workshops, and workshops focused on administrative dialogues on issues identified by Extension county agents.

8. O.S.U. Extension should concentrate on rewarding individual achievements and accomplishments rather than developing a system that rewards all Extension county agents equally, regardless of accomplishments (Buerge’, 1998). There should not be salary adjustments or monetary rewards based on longevity of employment, rather they should be based on impact of programs and for positive risk-taking, new partnership development, program growth, scholarly and creative works, and stakeholder feedback.

9. O.S.U. Extension should assist new Extension county agents’ to develop ongoing formal and informal networks within the organization so that they may better understand the complexity of the organization, including communication patterns, expectations, and policies and procedures. This initiative should include the purposeful selection of mentors who possess a positive outlook on the organizations future, are people orientated, have excellent communication and conflict-management skills, and are resourceful.

References


Kutilek, L. (2002). *Organizational justice as it relates to the effectiveness of work/life*


