

"WORKPLACE EQUALITY AND EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON GLOBAL BUSINESS PRACTICES"

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1. ABSTRACT:

This paper looks at how fair treatment at work affects how motivated employees feel. Many companies around the world now promote equality, but it is not always clear why this changes how hard people work or how much they care about their jobs. The research question is: *How does workplace equality affect employee motivation, and does this change from country to country?* This is a secondary research paper, which means it uses studies that other researchers already published instead of collecting new data. The findings are explained with three theories: Equity Theory, Organizational Justice, and Self-Determination Theory. Overall, the studies show that employees who feel they are treated fairly tend to trust their employers more, stay more committed, and feel better at work. Culture changes what people think is fair, but the basic wish to be treated with respect shows up in many places. Most of the studies only show links, not proof of cause, so the conclusions are careful. The paper ends with practical ideas for businesses.

2. INTRODUCTION:

2.1 Background of the Study-

Why do some people work hard while others barely try? Part of the answer is how they feel they are treated. Employees do not only look at their own pay and workload. They also compare themselves with coworkers and judge whether the way decisions are made seems fair. When people feel treated fairly, they usually put in more effort and stay loyal, but when they feel treated unfairly, they often pull back or leave (Colquitt et al., 2013).

This matters even more today because businesses are global. A single company can have employees from many countries, backgrounds and cultures. Laws and

public opinion say everyone should be treated equally, yet problems remain. In one well-known experiment, résumés with names linked to certain racial groups got fewer callbacks than identical résumés with other names (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Women also still earn less than men on average, even after researchers account for many differences (Blau & Kahn, 2017).

Psychology is a helpful lens here because equality is not only a business rule or a legal rule. It is also something people feel. Two employees can work under the exact same policy and still walk away with very different feelings about whether they are valued. Psychologists study those feelings and the thoughts behind them, so they can explain why equal pay or equal access can change how people act, even when the policy itself looks neutral. That is the reason this paper treats equality as a human experience and not just a checklist.

2.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Many companies treat equality as something they have to do for legal or image reasons. Fewer ask how employees actually feel about it, and how those feelings change motivation. Research on this topic is also scattered across different fields, and most of it comes from Western countries. The problem is that there is no simple, combined explanation of how workplace equality connects to motivation around the world.

2.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What does existing research say about how workplace equality relates to employee motivation?
2. Which psychological reasons explain this relationship?
3. How do cultural and international differences change the picture?

2.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To review studies on workplace equality, motivation, organizational justice and related psychological factors.
2. To explain the findings using Equity Theory, Organizational Justice and Self-Determination Theory.
3. To compare results across countries and point out gaps in the research.

2.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This paper is useful in two ways. For students and researchers, it brings together three theories that are usually studied alone. For managers and human resource teams, it explains why equality programs sometimes work and sometimes do not, and why a program that works in one country may need changes in another.

The topic also matters for ordinary workers. Most people spend a huge part of their lives at work, so being treated fairly or unfairly there can shape their confidence, their health and even how they see their own future. Understanding the research behind this can help future employees and future managers make better choices, and it can help business students see that treating people well is connected to results and not only to ethics.

2.6 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This paper only uses secondary research, meaning published articles, meta-analyses and well-known theory books. It does not include surveys or interviews of its own. It focuses on fairness in pay, decisions and treatment, with some attention to gender, race and culture. The main limits are that the review is not complete, many studies rely on self-reported surveys, and most come from Western countries. Also, the paper cannot prove cause and effect.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section looks at what researchers have found about four connected topics: workplace equality, employee motivation, organizational justice, and the psychological factors that link them.

3.1 WORKPLACE EQUALITY

Workplace equality means treating employees fairly no matter their gender, race, age or nationality, including equal chances for pay, training and promotion. It is related to diversity (having many types of people) and inclusion (making sure those people feel they belong). Shore et al. (2011) explain that inclusion happens when employees feel they belong to the group and also feel free to be themselves. So equality is not only about rules on paper. It is also about how people feel.

The evidence shows that unequal treatment still exists. In the résumé study mentioned earlier, applicants with names linked to minority groups got fewer callbacks than equally qualified applicants (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). A later meta-analysis, which combines the results of many studies, found that

hiring discrimination against some groups in the United States had barely changed over several decades (Quillian et al., 2017). Blau and Kahn (2017) found that the gender pay gap has become smaller but has not disappeared. These facts matter psychologically because employees who see or feel unequal treatment start to wonder how much the company values them.

Workplace climate also matters. Nishii (2013) found that teams with a strong climate for inclusion, where differences were valued and decisions seemed fair, had less conflict and more satisfied members. In short, equality is partly about what is true and partly about what people perceive.

Researchers have also asked whether equality and diversity help businesses, not only employees. Cox and Blake (1991) argued early on that managing diversity well can give companies advantages, such as better problem solving, more creativity and an easier time attracting talent. Herring (2009) used data from a national survey of U.S. businesses and found that more diverse workplaces were linked to higher sales, more customers and greater profits. These results are only associations, and other factors could be involved, but they suggest that fairness and good business results do not have to be opposites. Roberson (2006) also reminds us that diversity and inclusion are different ideas: diversity is about who is in the room, while inclusion is about whether those people are truly involved and able to take part.

Some of the most convincing evidence comes from studies of how organizations make decisions. Goldin and Rouse (2000) studied symphony orchestras and found evidence that using a screen during auditions, so the judges could not see the player, increased the chances that women moved on to later rounds. This suggests that hidden bias can affect decisions even when people believe they are being fair. Kalev et al. (2006) looked at hundreds of U.S. workplaces and found that programs that gave someone clear responsibility for results, such as diversity committees or task forces, did more to increase diversity in management than diversity training or evaluations alone. The lesson is that good intentions are not enough, and the design of a program matters.

3.2 EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION

Motivation is the energy that makes people start a task, aim in a direction, and keep going. Older theories focused on needs and rewards, but newer research also looks at the *type* of motivation. Self-Determination Theory separates autonomous motivation, where people do something because they truly care or see its value, from controlled motivation, where they act because of pressure or rewards (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Van den Broeck et al. (2016)

reviewed many studies and concluded that when workplaces meet people's basic psychological needs, employees show better well-being and engagement, and when those needs are blocked, outcomes get worse.

Motivation is also social. Adams (1963, 1965) argued that people judge what they get at work by comparing it with what others get. This means motivation depends partly on whether people believe the workplace is fair.

An older but important experiment shows why the type of motivation matters. Deci (1971) found that people who were paid to do an activity they already enjoyed later showed less interest in it once the pay stopped. This helped start the idea that rewards can sometimes weaken motivation if they feel controlling. For workplace equality, the point is that fair treatment is not just about giving the same rewards to everyone. It is also about whether people feel respected and in charge of their own work.

Motivation also depends on whether people feel safe to speak up. Edmondson (1999) studied work teams and described psychological safety as a shared belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks, like asking a question or admitting a mistake. Teams with higher psychological safety showed more learning behavior. When employees fear they will be judged unfairly because of who they are, this kind of safety is harder to build, which can reduce the effort and ideas they are willing to share.

3.3 ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE

Organizational justice is about how fair employees think their workplace is. Researchers usually describe three kinds: distributive justice (are the outcomes fair?), procedural justice (is the process used to decide fair?), and interactional justice (are people treated with respect and given honest explanations?) (Bies & Moag, 1986; Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1987). Leventhal (1980) said fair procedures should be consistent, free of bias, accurate, correctable and based on ethical standards. Thibaut and Walker (1975) and Lind and Tyler (1988) found that when people get a voice in a decision and are treated with dignity, they see the process as fairer, even when they do not get what they wanted.

Large reviews give a steady picture. Cohen-Charash and Spector (2001) found that employees who felt treated fairly had higher job satisfaction, more commitment and more trust, and were more willing to help coworkers. They also showed less harmful behavior. Colquitt et al. (2001) found that the three kinds of justice are different from each other but connected, and each one predicts work outcomes. Ten years later, Colquitt et al. (2013) found support for two

explanations: fairness builds trust and a give-and-take relationship, and fairness shapes people's emotions. Robbins et al. (2012) also found that feeling unfairly treated was linked to worse health. Cropanzano et al. (2007) argued that fairness matters so much because it meets needs for control, belonging and ethical treatment.

One important point is that equality and fairness are not exactly the same. Treating everyone identically may feel unfair if people have different needs or contribute different amounts, and unequal results can feel fair if they come from a clear, merit-based process (Leventhal, 1980). That is why researchers focus on *perceived* fairness.

More recent reviews keep supporting this view. Colquitt and Zipay (2015) summarized research on fairness and employee reactions and described how people use fairness information to decide whether they can trust their employer and how they fit into the group. In other words, fairness works like a signal. Every decision about pay, schedules, discipline or promotion tells employees something about how much the organization cares about them.

3.4 PSYCHOLOGY FACTORS

A few psychological ideas keep showing up as the link between equality and motivation. The first is trust: when employees believe they are treated fairly, they respond with effort and loyalty (Colquitt et al., 2013). The second is belonging, because being valued as a member of a group is a basic human need (Shore et al., 2011). The third is stress and emotion, since unfair treatment can cause anger and long-term stress (Robbins et al., 2012). The fourth is personality. Huseman et al. (1987) introduced the idea of *equity sensitivity*, which means people differ in how strongly they react to being under-rewarded or over-rewarded.

A classic field study shows how strong these reactions can be. Greenberg (1990) studied factories where pay was cut for a short time. Workers who were given an honest and caring explanation stole less than workers who got a weak explanation. This suggests that how bad news is delivered can change how people respond to unfairness.

Belonging deserves extra attention. Baumeister and Leary (1995) reviewed a large amount of research and argued that humans have a strong built-in need to form and keep close relationships and to feel accepted. If a person feels like an outsider at work because of gender, race or background, that basic need is under threat. This could help explain why unequal treatment is often linked to lower

commitment and higher turnover, since people tend to withdraw from places where they do not feel they belong.

3.5 INTERNATIONAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Culture changes what people think is fair. Hofstede (2001) described cultural dimensions such as individualism versus collectivism and power distance, which is how comfortable people are with unequal power. A meta-analysis by Fischer and Smith (2003) found that preferences about how rewards should be shared, by merit, equally or by need, depended on cultural values. Brockner et al. (2001) found that giving employees a voice improved fairness feelings less in high power-distance cultures, where people expect leaders to decide.

Still, some needs seem to be shared. Chirkov et al. (2003) found that autonomy, meaning acting from your own choice, was linked to well-being in several countries, including collectivist ones, as long as autonomy meant choosing freely rather than being independent from others. Together these studies suggest that the way fairness looks changes with culture, while the basic need to be treated fairly appears to be widespread.

Two more ideas help explain these differences. Markus and Kitayama (1991) described the independent self, common in many Western cultures, where people see themselves as separate and unique, and the interdependent self, common in many Eastern cultures, where people see themselves as connected to others. Someone with an interdependent view may care more about group harmony than about being singled out for individual reward. Gelfand et al. (2011) also compared 33 nations and found that some cultures are "tight," with strong rules and little tolerance for rule-breaking, while others are "loose," with weaker rules and more freedom. Fairness may look different in tight and loose workplaces. These are broad patterns, though, and people inside every culture still differ from one another.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three theories help explain how workplace equality connects to motivation. Equity Theory is about comparing ourselves with others, Organizational Justice is about how fairness is judged, and Self-Determination Theory is about why fairness changes the kind of motivation we feel.

4.1 EQUITY THEORY

Equity Theory was created by the psychologist J. Stacy Adams (1963, 1965). His name is sometimes written as "John Stacey" by mistake. Adams said that employees compare what they put in (effort, skills, experience, education) and what they get out (pay, praise, promotions, job

security) with the same ratio for someone else. If the ratios are not equal, people feel tension and try to fix it. They might work less, ask for more, change who they compare themselves to, or quit. Walster et al. (1973) later applied the idea to relationships in general.

The key idea is *perceived fairness*. What counts is not whether things are truly equal but whether the person believes they are. This fits workplace equality well. If one group believes others get more reward for the same work, they will feel the unfairness no matter what the company intended. Huseman et al. (1987) added that people differ in how sensitive they are to this, so the same situation can bother one person and not another.

Here is an everyday example. Imagine two coworkers with the same job, the same experience and the same hours. One finds out the other earns more. Under Equity Theory, the lower-paid worker sees that their input-to-outcome ratio is worse and feels cheated. Adams (1965) said the person might respond by working less, asking for a raise, or deciding to leave. Notice that nothing about the worker's real effort changed. Only their *perception* changed, and that was enough to shift their motivation. Equity Theory also points out that people can feel uneasy when they are over-rewarded, although research suggests people usually react more strongly to under-reward.

4.2 ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE

Organizational Justice looks beyond results and asks whether the *process* and the *treatment* were fair (Greenberg, 1987). Distributive justice is close to what Adams described. Procedural justice asks whether decisions are made in a consistent, unbiased way that allows people to speak up and appeal (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Interactional justice is about respect and honest explanations (Bies & Moag, 1986). Colquitt (2001) split it further into interpersonal and informational justice.

Lind and Tyler (1988) explained why this matters: a fair process tells people they are valued members of the group. That is why people can accept a bad result if the process was fair and respectful. For equality, this means that anti-discrimination rules work best when employees also see open decisions and are treated with respect.

A simple example is a company that tells employees their raises were decided "by management" with no explanation. Even if the raises are fair, employees may doubt them because the process is hidden. If the company explained the criteria, let people ask questions, and treated everyone politely, the same raises would probably feel much fairer. This is why Organizational Justice adds something that Equity Theory alone does not cover: it shows that fairness is about how decisions are made and delivered, and not only about what people receive.

4.3 SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Self-Determination Theory says all people have three basic psychological needs, and meeting them leads to better motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017):

- **Autonomy:** feeling that you act by your own choice and are not just being controlled.
- **Competence:** feeling that you are good at what you do and can keep growing.

- **Relatedness:** feeling connected to others and that you belong.

When a workplace supports these needs, employees take goals on as their own and become more autonomously motivated. When it blocks them, motivation weakens (Deci et al., 2017; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Unequal treatment can hurt all three needs. Being passed over for training hurts competence, being left out of decisions hurts autonomy, and being excluded socially hurts relatedness.

Self-Determination Theory also helps explain why rewards alone do not fix inequality. Deci (1971) showed that rewards can sometimes reduce interest in a task, and Deci et al. (2017) summarized decades of work showing that workplaces that support autonomy, competence and relatedness are linked to stronger engagement and well-being. So a company that fixes a pay gap but still excludes some employees from decisions or friendships may meet one fairness need while still frustrating others. Real equality involves several parts working together.

4.4 PUTTING THE THEORIES TOGETHER

The three theories fit together like steps. Equality practices shape how fair things feel. Those feelings shape comparisons (Equity Theory) and trust (Organizational Justice). Then, the result either supports or blocks the three needs (Self-Determination Theory), and that changes motivation. This is my own way of connecting the theories to make sense of the research. It is not a proven model, so each step would still need to be tested.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1 COMPARING FINDINGS FROM EXISTING STUDIES

The studies agree more than they disagree. The justice meta-analyses show that feeling fairly treated goes with higher satisfaction, commitment, trust and helpful behavior, and with less withdrawal and harmful behavior (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001, 2013). The Self-Determination research shows that meeting basic needs goes with better engagement and well-being (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). The inclusion research connects inclusive climates with better teamwork (Nishii, 2013). Because different methods and theories point the same way, we can be fairly confident the link is real, though the effects are often only moderate in size.

The theories do stress different things. Equity research is about comparison, justice research is about process and respect, and Self-Determination Theory is about inner needs. Fair outcomes alone are not the whole story, because a fair process and respectful treatment can make a disappointing outcome easier to accept (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Greenberg, 1990).

5.2 PSYCHOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS

The research suggests a few reasons why fairness affects motivation. First, fairness builds trust, and employees return that trust with extra effort (Colquitt et al., 2013). Second, fair treatment tells people they belong, which supports relatedness (Shore et al., 2011; Lind & Tyler, 1988). Third, fairness makes work feel more predictable and under control, which supports autonomy

and lowers stress (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Robbins et al., 2012). Fourth, equal access to training and growth supports competence. These explanations make sense and some have been tested, but they are still interpretations of the patterns researchers found.

5.3 INTERNATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Culture changes how people judge fairness. Reward preferences differ across cultures (Fischer & Smith, 2003), and giving employees a voice has a weaker effect in cultures with high power distance (Brockner et al., 2001). At the same time, acting from your own choice helps well-being even in collectivist cultures (Chirkov et al., 2003). My reading is that the *need* for fair and respectful treatment is shared, while the *form* it takes depends on culture. A global company therefore needs the same basic principles everywhere but flexible ways of applying them. Cultural labels describe averages only, so they should never be used to stereotype individual people.

5.4 RESEARCH GAPS

There are several gaps. Most studies take one snapshot in time and use self-reports, so it is hard to know what causes what. Most participants come from North America and Europe, with far fewer from Africa, South Asia and Latin America. Few studies test equality policies, fairness feelings and need satisfaction all together. Results on diversity training are also mixed (Bezrukova et al., 2016), and Dobbin and Kalev (2016) argue that some popular programs do not actually reduce inequality. This shows why companies need to test whether their programs work.

5.5 CORRELATION AND CAUSATION

Most of the studies in this paper show that two things go together, not that one causes the other. Fairness might raise motivation, but motivated employees might also just describe their company as fairer. A third factor, like a good manager, could also cause both. Experiments and long-term studies give stronger evidence, such as Greenberg's (1990) pay-cut study, but they are rare. So this paper says the evidence is consistent with a causal story, and does not claim to prove one.

5.6 SUMMARY OF THE MAIN EVIDENCE

To keep the discussion clear, here is a short summary of the main kinds of evidence used in this paper and what each one adds:

- Experiments and field studies (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Goldin & Rouse, 2000; Greenberg, 1990) give the strongest hints about cause and effect, and they show that bias and poor treatment have real effects.
- Meta-analyses (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001, 2013; Fischer & Smith, 2003; Quillian et al., 2017; Robbins et al., 2012) combine many studies and show steady patterns across different workplaces and countries.

- Large organizational studies (Herring, 2009; Kalev et al., 2006; Nishii, 2013) show how policies and climates connect to real workplace results.
- Theory and reviews (Adams, 1965; Colquitt & Zipay, 2015; Deci et al., 2017; Shore et al., 2011) explain why the patterns might happen.

No single type of study is perfect. Experiments can feel artificial, surveys depend on what people say, and large studies cannot always rule out other explanations. Because the different kinds of evidence mostly agree, the overall message is more believable than any one study by itself.

6. BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS

In this section, each "Evidence" line is what the research found. Each "Recommendation" line is my own suggestion based on that evidence. The recommendations are reasoned ideas, not tested rules, so companies should try them and check the results.

6.1 FAIR WORKPLACE POLICIES

Evidence: Fair processes and respectful treatment go with more trust and commitment and less harmful behavior (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2013). A caring explanation can soften reactions to bad news (Greenberg, 1990).

Recommendation: Companies could share how pay and promotion decisions are made, apply the rules the same way every time, let employees appeal, and explain decisions respectfully.

6.2 EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION

Evidence: People judge recognition by comparing it with others (Adams, 1965). Feedback that builds competence supports real motivation, while controlling rewards can weaken it (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Recommendation: Companies could give recognition for clear, job-related results, give it equally across groups, and focus on useful feedback instead of only rewards.

6.3 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Evidence: Hiring discrimination and pay gaps still exist (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Blau & Kahn, 2017; Quillian et al., 2017), and diversity training has mixed results (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016).

Recommendation: Companies could check their hiring, pay and promotion data for gaps, use structured interviews, open mentoring and training to everyone, and measure whether each program works.

6.4 ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Evidence: Inclusive climates help diverse teams (Nishii, 2013), and people need both to belong and to be themselves (Shore et al., 2011).

Recommendation: Leaders could model respect, ask for different opinions, and adjust how they gather input to fit local customs, such as group meetings in high power-distance cultures (Brockner et al., 2001).

6.5 EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

Evidence: Unfair treatment is linked to worse health (Robbins et al., 2012), and meeting basic needs is linked to better well-being (Van den Broeck et al., 2016).

Recommendation: Companies could treat fairness as part of their well-being plan, survey employees regularly and compare results across groups, and train managers to support autonomy, growth and belonging.

6.6 PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Evidence: Kalev et al. (2006) found that programs with clear responsibility and accountability did more to increase diversity than training alone, and Bezrukova et al. (2016) found that diversity training works better when it is spread over time and combined with other efforts.

Recommendation: A business could start small by choosing one or two goals, such as clearer promotion criteria or a yearly pay review, and assigning a specific person to be responsible. After that, it could collect feedback from employees, check whether perceptions improve, and adjust. Starting with an honest measure of how employees currently feel is probably better than copying a program that worked somewhere else.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 MAIN INSIGHTS FROM THE LITERATURE

The research shows that motivation is closely tied to feeling fairly treated. Equity Theory explains that people compare what they get with what others get. Organizational Justice shows that outcomes, processes and respect all matter. Self-Determination Theory explains that fair workplaces help people feel free, capable and connected. Culture changes what fairness looks like, but the need for respect seems to be shared.

7.2 ANSWER TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research question asked how workplace equality affects motivation and whether this changes across countries. The evidence suggests that equality works mostly through what employees perceive and experience. When people feel fairness in outcomes, processes and treatment, they tend to trust more, commit more and feel better, probably because their needs for respect, belonging, control and growth are met. Culture changes how fairness is understood, so global companies need the same principles with local flexibility. Since most evidence only shows links, the answer describes strong patterns, not proven causes.

A final thought is that equality and motivation seem to feed each other. When people feel respected they give more, and when organizations see people giving more they have more reason

to keep treating them well. The opposite can also happen. Unfair treatment can lead to withdrawal, which can lead to weaker results, which can lead to even harsher decisions. Understanding this cycle is one reason the topic deserves attention from both psychologists and business leaders.

7.3 LIMITATIONS

This paper uses only secondary sources, and the review is selective, so some studies were left out. Most of the research comes from Western countries and relies on self-reports at a single point in time. The way I connected the theories is not tested. Cultural patterns are general trends and do not describe every person.

7.4 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies could follow employees over time or use experiments to test cause and effect. They could also test trust and need satisfaction in the same model, include more countries and industries, study remote and gig workers, and check which equality programs have lasting effects. A large meta-analysis combining justice, inclusion and need satisfaction would be a good next step.

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