Justice in leadership: the state of the field

Angus robson

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk
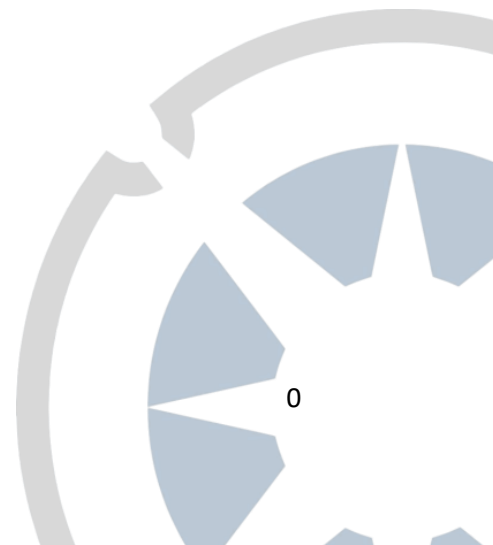
Justice in leadership: the state of the field

Angus Robson

Northumbria University

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Abstract

A review of the literature on justice and leadership suggests that the field is dominated by a paradigm of organizational justice which avoids philosophical discussion of justice as a normative concept. A small number of studies venture in-depth discussions of justice as a moral principle or virtue, but there is no particular focus on justice as a virtue of leadership and no broad agreement on what just leadership requires.

A more mature discourse is needed, which articulates normative ideas of what justice in leadership should look like. Because the normative concept of justice is both disputed and central in most schools of moral philosophy, it is suggested that such a discourse should be elective, hermeneutic and developmental.

Introduction

A widely used textbook on judgment in managerial decision making complains:

"Most fairness research has avoided making evaluative statements about the rationality of fairness judgments. This silence has inhibited our understanding of how our cognitive processes create anger, jealousy, and inefficiency. If we are to reduce or eliminate our dysfunctional perceptions of fairness, we need to confront the rationality of fairness perceptions." (Bazerman & Moore, 2012, p. 133)

The authors go on to discuss the unreliability of fairness judgments and the way that they are liable to interfere with rational business decision making. They then set fairness aside as too quixotic and move on to questions of business ethics instead. Why do Bazerman and Moore find fairness so irritating? And why do they not consider it as part and parcel of business ethics?

A review of the literature on justice in leadership supports Bazerman and Moore's broadly pessimistic assessment of the prevailing direction of research. However, their equally 2

pessimistic acceptance that fairness is a purely a question of perspective, variable from one person to another, ignores the connection of fairness with justice and so misses a more positive way forward.

This paper argues for the rehabilitation of justice as a central virtue of leadership, through a more adequate discussion of the core concept. Such discussion will entail not only pursuing some

particular tradition of justice, but actively encouraging the engagement of rival ones in constructive debate.

Literature Review

A systematic literature search of peer-reviewed articles in business and management studies was conducted, with the aim of compiling a set of articles on the connection between justice and ethics of leadership. Since ethical leadership is a well known quantified construct, two main searches were conducted, one specifying the term *ethical leadership*, the other splitting out the terms *leadership* and *ethics*. An additional search was conducted using the term *virtuous leadership*.

A database search conducted on Web of Science for English language peer reviewed articles in the categories of *management* and *business* with the following topic parameters:

- • Topics: "ethical leadership" AND justice.

- • Topics: leadership AND ethics AND justice.

- • Topics: "virtuous leadership" AND justice.

These lists were compared, duplications between the lists were removed, and an initial sift was conducted to exclude articles which did not meaningfully address the topic or otherwise fell outside of the search targets1. This resulted in a complete list of 253 articles on the desired topics finalised on 1st October 2023.

1 Examples of exclusions: articles listing the topic 'justice', but not mentioning justice in the body of the article; book review; editorial; article not in English; article not accessible.

The complete list of articles was then analysed for the main conception of justice being used. These were grouped into concept themes: organizational justice, virtues, ethic of justice, social justice, justice orientation, Levinasian, other, unclear. Summary results are shown at Table 1. 3

Table 1. Summary of peer-reviewed articles on justice in connection with leadership ethics, grouped by concept of justice. **Concept theme**	**No of articles**	**Description of concept**	**Sample articles**	**Key sources**
Organizational justice	179	Organizational justice as a quantifiable, descriptive construct, measuring subjective	Brebels et al. (2011); Gao and He (2017); Mayer et al. (2008); Xu et al. (2016)	Colquitt et al. (2001), Colquitt (2001)

		perceptions of fair treatment (distributive, procedural, interactional and informational) among organization members.		
Virtue	21	Justice as a habit of thought and action of the leader, discussed in Aristotelian, Islamic and other traditions.	Hackett and Wang (2012); Bauman (2018) Zaim et al. (2021)	Aristotle, Quran, Aquinas, Plato, Cicero and others
Ethic of justice	9	Moral reasoning based on "impartiality, fairness, reciprocity, and the application of universal moral principles" (Simola et al., 2010, p. 180); contrasted with ethic of care.	Simola et al. (2010)	Kohlberg and Hersh (1977)
Social justice	6	Concern for "dignity of the human person, community and the common good …" Sabbaghi, Cavanagh S. J, and Hipskind S. J (2013) (p.134).	Sabbaghi et al. (2013)	Catholic Social Teaching
Justice orientation	6	"Justice orientation refers to making fair and consistent decisions and not discriminating	Pless et al. (2022)	Eisenbeiss (2012)

		against others" (Eisenbeiss, 2012, p. 796)		
Levinasian	2	Ethical demand of the Other, based in affectual relationships which recognise others as a 'face'.	Faldetta (2016) Rhodes (2012)	Levinas (1979)
Other	11	Each article in a conceptual category by itself. Examples: retributive, Abrahamic, critical theory, personalist.	Fischer and Friedman (2019), Mele (2014)	n/a
Unclear	19	Justice mentioned without clear description or category	Beiranvand et al. (2021), Hoyt and Price (2015)	n/a
Total		253		