

THE ROLE OF FAIRNESS ORIENTATION AND SUPERVISOR ATTRIBUTIONS IN ABSENCE DISCIPLINARY DECISIONS

Timothy A. Judge

Cornell University

Joseph J. Martocchio

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

ABSTRACT: The present study investigated the role of the work value of fairness and attributions regarding the causes of absence in supervisor disciplinary decisions. It was hypothesized that supervisors who valued fairness, and those who made internal attributions regarding the cause of a particular absence incident, render more severe disciplinary decisions than supervisors who value fairness less, and who make external attributions. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that the degree to which supervisors valued fairness moderates the relationship between external attributions and the severity of disciplinary decisions. Using a policy capturing approach, results were consistent with predictions. Implications of the results for research and practice are discussed.

Values are internalized standards of evaluation concerning that which is fundamentally right or wrong (Kluckhohn, 1951; Rokeach, 1973). Work values represent these standards as applied to the work environment. While work values such as the Protestant Work Ethic have received a great deal of research attention (Weber, 1958; Wollack, Goodale, Wijting, & Smith, 1971), recent research has suggested that four work values are the most important and salient to individuals: achievement, honesty, concern for others, and fairness (Cornelius, Ullman, Meglino, Czajka, & McNeely, 1985; Ravlin & Meglino, 1987). These work values have been shown to influence a number of work-related cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors, including job satisfaction,

Tim Judge is now at the Department of Management and Organization, College of Business Administration, University of Iowa. Address correspondence to Tim Judge, Department of Management and Organization, College of Business Administration, University of Iowa, 108 Pappajohn Business Administration Building, Iowa City, Iowa 52242.

organizational commitment, and job choice decisions (Judge & Bretz, 1992; Meglino, Ravlin, & Adkins, 1989, 1991; Ravlin & Meglino, 1987, 1989). However, these represent only a few of the potential applications of work values.

Supervisory behavior represents one potential application. England (1967) demonstrated that managers with strong value orientations tended to act in accordance with what they thought was "right," while managers with more pragmatic orientations tended to behave in ways that they thought were "successful." This suggests that the work value of fairness, or being impartial and doing what is equitable for all concerned (Meglino et al., 1991), is particularly relevant to managers due to their potential control over subordinate behavior. In no area is this control more clearly manifested than in the area of employee discipline, where supervisory actions are designed to act as direct control mechanisms over employee behavior (Arvey & Jones, 1985). It also represents an area in which the fairness of the supervisor is crucial to the equitable treatment of subordinates and the motivation of employees (Arvey & Jones, 1985; Podsakoff, 1982).

The role of supervisor attributions in disciplinary or punishment decisions has been emphasized by a number of authors (Arvey & Jones, 1985; Green & Mitchell, 1979; Klaas & Wheeler, 1990; Podsakoff, 1982). Because most supervisors probably believe it is unfair to punish subordinates for outcomes over which they have no control, attributions are likely to be a key factor in the discipline decision-making process. These attributions are likely to be particularly important to those who value fairness; thus attributions and the value of fairness may conjointly influence disciplinary decisions.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the role of the work value of fairness and supervisory attributions in absence disciplinary decisions. On the basis of past research, it was hypothesized that supervisors who believe fairness is an important work value provide more severe discipline. Also, supervisors who attributed absence occurrences as within the subordinates' control were more likely to provide more severe discipline. Finally, it was hypothesized that the relationship between attributions regarding the cause of absence and disciplinary decisions will be stronger for supervisors who place a high value on fairness than for those who value fairness less. Before discussing the hypotheses, relevant research is reviewed regarding absence and disciplinary decisions.

EMPLOYEE ABSENCE AND DISCIPLINARY DECISIONS

Past research has suggested that employee absenteeism leads to a number of outcomes organizations may find undesirable, including di-

minished employee job performance (Bycio, 1992), overstaffing to compensate for absent employees (Rhodes & Steers, 1990), and disruption of an organization's work flow (Atkin & Goodman, 1984). Thus, because employee absence represents a significant financial burden on organizations (Martocchio, 1992), managers and supervisors have a keen interest in minimizing absence levels. One justifiable means through which managers and supervisors can reduce absenteeism is through specific punishments that are specified in the organization's absence control policy (Martocchio & Judge, 1995).

Most absence control policies distinguish between acceptable versus unacceptable reasons for absence occurrences (Kuzmits, 1981). Absence control policies which distinguish between licit and illicit absences require substantially more supervisory discretion in judging the acceptability of particular absence occurrences (Rhodes & Steers, 1990). Because absence control policies often specify a range of appropriate disciplinary sanctions, discipline for an employee depends largely on a judgment made by a supervisor. Thus, it is quite possible that these judgments are influenced by attributions and work values such as fairness. However, there is a dearth of research on the decision process supervisors engage in when responding to employee absenteeism (Ballagh, Maxwell, & Perea, 1987; Martocchio & Judge, 1995).

The existing literature on appropriate supervisory responses to employee absenteeism derives largely from arbitration decisions. Generally, a reasonable absence control policy is based on progressive discipline as a way to correct absenteeism problems (Redeker, 1989). Progressive discipline systems specify an acceptable range of responses, in this case to absenteeism, that are more serious in nature as the absence problem continues. Progressive discipline systems are reasonable because they provide an employee with the opportunity to change his/her absence activity. In particular, such systems are believed to be effective for reducing chronic short-term absences (Ballagh et al., 1987), which tend to be disruptive to employers because it is often difficult to arrange replacements on frequent and short-term bases. Despite the apparent reasonableness of progressive discipline systems, it is critical they be used consistently and fairly. In situations where the rules of such a system have not been applied consistently, arbitrators generally reinstate employees regardless of the severity of employee absenteeism (Redeker, 1989; Rosenthal, 1979).

Thus, employee absenteeism represents a reasonable context in which to study disciplinary decisions. As noted earlier, the work value of fairness may be particularly relevant to disciplinary decisions, including those as a result of employee absenteeism. Because not all absences are within the employee's control, also pertinent are supervisors attributions regarding the cause of an absence incident, in particular whether the absence was within the control of the employee. In the next section

of the paper the role of fairness and supervisor attributions in the disciplinary process are hypothesized.

HYPOTHESES

The Role of Fairness in Disciplinary Decisions

In reviewing potential influences on supervisory punishment decisions, Podsakoff (1982) noted that very little research had addressed the influence of personal characteristics of the supervisor on disciplinary decisions. As noted earlier, the work value of fairness may be a particularly relevant factor in disciplinary decisions. Arvey and Jones (1985) argued that a good supervisor is not one who refrains from using discipline, but rather one who administers discipline in a fair manner. As pointed out by England (1967), managers seem to be guided by what they see as fair, or what they see as instrumental. Those who view discipline from an instrumental perspective may be more likely to see the disadvantages to disciplining subordinates, such as grievances, subordinate resentment, and so on (Nicholson, 1976). This may make supervisors guided by practical considerations reluctant to discipline subordinates. Instrumental supervisors may also have a self-serving bias in discipline, where infrequent disciplinary actions on the part of supervisors can be construed as an indication of their own effectiveness (Greenberg, 1985). Thus, instrumental supervisors are less guided by values such as fairness (England, 1967), and consequently they may be less willing to discipline subordinates. Conversely, supervisors who believe fairness is an important value may be more willing to discipline subordinates because under a progressive discipline system the most equitable course of action is to let the punishment fit the offense. This often requires supervisors to make harsh disciplinary decisions. To do otherwise is not fair to those who have not committed an offense (Arvey & Jones, 1985; Klaas & Dell'Omo, 1991). Thus,

- H1: Supervisors who value fairness should be more willing to discipline subordinates than supervisors who value fairness less.

The Role of Attributions in Discipline Decisions

While the outcomes of disciplinary decisions are likely to be of primary interest to practitioners, the psychological factors related to supervisor's decisions are likely to be of interest to researchers. Green and Mitchell (1979) advanced a model of the attributional processes of leaders in leader-member exchanges that provides a basis for under-

standing the psychology of supervisors' disciplinary responses to absence. Greater insight into the probable causes of supervisory behavior (in this case, the disciplinary decisions) can be obtained by examining how a leader (in this case, a supervisor) responds to the behavior of a subordinate (Green & Mitchell, 1979).

Green and Mitchell's (1979) model is based on a two-stage process. In the first stage, subordinate behavior causes a supervisor to search for information that will explain that behavior (i.e., attributions). Consistent with attribution theory (Kelley, 1967), two types of attributions are possible: (a) internal (attributing the cause of the problem to the employee), or (b) external (attributing the cause of the problem to factors other than the employee). Whereas internal attributions refer to behavior that is caused by factors such as ability or effort, external attributions represent the converse in that they refer to behavior that is caused by bad luck or uncontrollable situational factors.

In the second stage of the attribution process, the supervisor determines what action to take based on his or her attributions. In the context of administering a disciplinary program, the model would suggest that external attributions will lead to less severe disciplinary action than if internal attributions are made. In an application of the Green and Mitchell (1979) model, Green and Liden (1980) conducted a laboratory experiment of students which examined the effects of contextual and attributional influences on supervisory use of an organizational control policy related to subordinate performance on a production task (i.e., good performance was operationalized as meeting the production deadline, and poor performance was operationalized as not meeting the production deadline). Green and Liden (1980) found that supervisors' beliefs about the cause of subordinates' poor performance affected the focus and the intensity of the supervisors' actions as well as the extent to which they implemented the control policy. Specifically, when the subordinates' poor performance was portrayed as being due to internal reasons as opposed to external reasons, performance was attributed more to personal characteristics, and less to situational characteristics. The supervisor directed responses at the subordinate significantly more than at situational factors and these responses were more intense than when in the external condition.

Similar support for Green and Mitchell's (1979) two-stage model recently was found by Ashkanasy (1989). Arvey and Jones (1985) agreed with the relevance of attribution theory to disciplinary decisions when they argued that ". . . employees should not be punished for things over which they have no control" (p. 394). In fact, in their proposed model of organizational discipline, attributions about the cause of the employee's action are the precipitating factor in the decision to discipline a subordinate. Thus, on the basis of theory and past research,

- H2: The more a supervisor attributes the reasons for subordinate absence to external factors (i.e., factors beyond the subordinate's control), the less severe the disciplinary decision.

The Moderating Effect of Fairness Orientation

It also is expected that the degree to which supervisors value fairness will moderate the relationship between attributions regarding the cause of absence and the disciplinary action taken. Arvey and Jones (1985) argued that it is unfair for employees to be punished for things over which they have no control. As pointed out by Klaas and Dell'Omo (1991), this is consistent with the individual rights perspective, which emphasizes that disciplinary actions should be fair to employees accused of violations. From an organizational justice perspective, Thibaut and Walker (1975) and Folger and Greenberg (1985) have argued that a just personnel program should give the employee decision control, or the opportunity to make decisions regarding their outcomes. When employees have little control over absence, however, decision control is low because they by definition have a limited ability to control their absence. Thus, from this perspective disciplinary systems which punish employees for events beyond their control can be inferred to be unfair. Quite logically, then, it is expected that supervisors who place a high value on fairness will be more likely to consider the discretionary nature of the absence when making disciplinary decisions than supervisors who value fairness to a lesser degree. Those who value fairness are concerned with the just treatment of others; such individuals should be especially reticent to discipline individuals for absences beyond their control because such actions would violate norms of fairness (Arvey & Jones, 1985). Thus,

- H3: The degree to which supervisors identify with the work value of fairness will moderate the relationship between external attributions and severity of disciplinary decisions, such that the relationship between attributions regarding the cause of absence and disciplinary decisions will be stronger for supervisors who place a high value on fairness than for those who value fairness less.

CONTROL VARIABLES

In order to insure that the tests of the hypotheses were valid, other influences on the dependent variable need to be taken into account (James, 1991). Thus, it is important to control for other factors that likely influence disciplinary decisions. Podsakoff's review (1982) sug-

gested that one central class of variables that should influence the use of discipline is subordinate factors, or behaviors on the part of subordinates that make disciplinary action necessary. A review of past research (Ballagh et al., 1987; Klaas, 1989; Klaas & Dell'Omo, 1991; Klaas & Wheeler, 1990; Rhodes & Steers, 1990), and an elicitation study conducted by Martocchio (1992), suggested six factors that should be influential in supervisors' decisions to discipline subordinates as a result of absence. First, consistent with Klaas (1989), it is expected that an employee's prior job performance will have an impact on the severity of discipline because disciplining high performers may cause them to withdraw from the organization. Second, it is expected that prior absence history will lead to more severe disciplinary decisions because arbitration precedents indicate that arbitrators consider aspects of the grievant's work history in order to determine whether the disciplinary sanction was for "just cause" (Elkouri & Elkouri, 1981).

Third, it is expected that the criticality of the absentee to the work unit will influence disciplinary decisions. Klaas and Wheeler (1990) have argued that where demand for labor is inelastic, the cost of disciplinary action is likely to increase as the severity of the action increases. Boise (1965) found that supervisors were less willing to impose penalties on subordinates when their skills were in short supply. This leads to the expectation that an absentee whose criticality to his/her department is high will be disciplined less severely than an absentee whose criticality to his/her department is low.

Fourth, the ability of the absentee to attend work is expected to influence disciplinary decisions. Researchers have argued and demonstrated that ability to attend (i.e., family demands or kinship responsibilities) is likely to increase employee absenteeism from work (Rhodes & Steers, 1990). Klaas and Wheeler (1990) showed that a number of personnel managers and line managers imposed less severe disciplinary action when an employee had substantial personal problems than when an employee did not have substantial personal problems. Thus, an absentee's ability to attend should lead to a more severe disciplinary decision.

Two other factors were identified in the elicitation study as salient considerations in supervisory responses to absenteeism; employee status and whether the absence was approved or not approved. Newly-hired employees of the organization under study are designated as probationary status employees for the initial period of employment. During the probationary period, employee absenteeism is monitored frequently. Because a probationary period is a time when one would expect an employee to put his/her "best foot forward," it is likely that a supervisor has high expectations of employee attendance. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that disciplinary action, on average, will be more severe for proba-

tionary status employees than employees who are beyond the probationary period (i.e., full status employees).

Absence approval refers to whether the organization's control policy treats a particular absence occurrence as legitimate or illegitimate. Intuitively, one would expect there to be no discipline in response to an approved absence, and the use of discipline in response to an unapproved absence. This expectation is consistent with the treatment of unapproved absence as a breach of one's duty to report to work (Ballagh et al., 1987). However, research suggests that disciplinary responses are based on an accumulation of prior absences, and approved absences often get mixed in with unapproved absences (Ballagh et al., 1987). Thus, while absence approval may not perfectly predict disciplinary actions, it is expected that unapproved absences will lead to more severe disciplinary decisions than approved absences.

It also was thought to be prudent to control for the influence of several other relevant variables. Consistent with Podsakoff (1982), it is expected that as span of control increases, disciplinary action is more likely to occur because there often is a greater need for formal control systems in larger work units (Jones, 1984).

Supervisor experience has been found to be an influential variable in performance rating decisions. Unfortunately, research has not been consistent in demonstrating the direction of the relationship. For example, Judge and Ferris (1993) argued that supervisory experience may positively influence performance ratings because less experienced supervisors rate more harshly as a means of demonstrating their capabilities to handle the job of supervisor and make "tough" decisions. As supervisors gain more experience, self-confidence, and become established in their jobs, there is less perceived need to demonstrate one's toughness, and, in fact, they may well adopt more lenient rating tendencies. Another explanation is that supervisors experience the costs of giving unfavorable ratings only over time, through subordinate complaints, appeals, and hostility. Perhaps more experienced supervisors have learned that unfavorable ratings simply are not worth the trouble they cause. On the other hand, supervisor experience may be negatively related to performance ratings because less experienced supervisors may have recently been in the subordinate's role themselves, and thus can greater empathize with subordinates. Also, less experienced supervisors may be less confident in their role as supervisor, and thus less willing to impose punishment upon subordinates. Regardless of which directional prediction is true, past research in the performance evaluation literature suggests the role of supervisor experience as an explanatory variable (Judge & Ferris, 1993). Given the conceptual similarity between performance rating decisions and disciplinary decisions, supervisor experience was thought to be relevant to disciplinary decisions as well. Thus, supervisor

experience was included as a control variable. However, in order to avoid confounding age effects with experience effects (Kacmar & Ferris, 1989), age of the supervisor also was instituted as a control variable.

Finally, one of the personal variables discussed by Podsakoff (1982) was locus of control. Locus of control is a personality construct which represents the degree to which individuals believe outcomes in life are determined by fate, luck, or other uncontrollable factors (external locus of control), or that the control of one's own fate lies primarily within the self (internal locus of control) (Rotter, 1966). Conceptually, one would expect supervisors with an external locus of control to be less willing to discipline subordinates because those who believe one cannot control their destiny should be less willing to punish subordinates for these "chance" outcomes. Thus, locus of control of the supervisor was instituted as a control variable.

METHOD

Setting and Subjects

Respondents consisted of 24 supervisors in nonacademic departments at a Midwestern university. The supervisors came from a variety of departments in the university. Average age of supervisors was 43.7 years ($SD = 11.7$ years). Half of the supervisors were male, and 62% were married. Twenty-five percent of supervisors had one or more children. Whites constituted 92% of the respondents. Over half (54%) had some college or an associates degree. On average, supervisors worked for the university for 14.5 years ($SD = 8.2$ years). The average supervisor span of control was 10.9 subordinates ($SD = 8.5$ subordinates).

Research Design

A mixed experimental design was used, which incorporates both within-subjects and between-subjects components (Keppel, 1982). Each within-subjects factor contained two levels (i.e., the factor was present or not). The six within-subjects independent variables (i.e., absence history, absentee criticality, ability to attend, unapproved absence, probationary status, and prior job performance) were completely crossed which permits assessment of the independent effects of each factor on disciplinary decisions. Crossing the factors resulted in 64 scenarios which contained all possible combinations. In addition, six scenarios were replicated at random in order to assess the reliability of supervisor attributions and disciplinary decisions. The scenarios were presented in the survey in random order to prevent order effects. Information within

scenarios was ordered randomly for the same reasons. An example of a scenario is provided.

Hill is a *status* employee whose job performance is *below average*. Hill has unique skills that are scarce in your department. Today's absence was *not* approved. Hill has had less than 4 days absent in the past year. Hill is physically *unable* to attend work today.

Supervisors were asked to make disciplinary judgments and external attributions based on each scenario.

Measures

Absence Disciplinary Decision. Disciplinary decision as a result of absence was operationalized in the following manner: "As this employee's supervisor, please indicate what you would do in response by choosing from among nine possible actions." The nine alternate responses were listed as follows: (1) Take no action, (2) Monitor this absence activity, but take no remedial action, (3) Conduct a counseling session with this employee, (4) Administer a verbal warning to this employee, (5) Administer a written warning to this employee, (6) Suspend this employee without pay for 3 days, (7) Suspend this employee without pay for 10 days, (8) Suspend this employee without pay for 30 days, and (9) Discharge this employee. These choices reflect the actual options available to supervisors in this organization, and they are consistent with successive steps in progressive discipline programs (Ballagh et al., 1987; Belohlav, 1985; Klaas & Wheeler, 1990).

Reliability of the dependent variable was calculated by computing reliability coefficients for each of the six replicated scenarios, and then averaging the six reliability coefficients. The resulting reliability estimate of this measure was .75.

External Attribution About the Cause of Absence. Belief about whether the absence occurrence depicted in each scenario was due to factors external to employees (e.g., beyond the employees' control) was operationalized in the following manner: "I believe this absence was caused by factors external to this employee (for example, bad luck or uncontrollable situational factors)." A seven-point Likert-type scale was used, and it was anchored by 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' Reliability of this measure was calculated in the same manner as for the disciplinary decision. The overall reliability estimate for this measure was .71.

Fairness Orientation. The degree to which supervisors endorsed the work value of fairness was assessed by the Comparative Emphasis Scale (CES), a survey developed and tested by Ravlin and Meglino (1987, 1989). The CES presents 12 statements describing each of four work values (fairness, achievement, concern for others, and honesty). These

48 statements are divided into pairs such that a statement representing each of the four values is paired with each other value four times. For each pair, the individual is asked to check which value the respondent feels should be emphasized most in their behavior. Each of the four comparison replications was randomized in order and in the value that appeared first in each pair. The emphasis on what the individual should or ought to display is consistent with most conceptualizations of social values (Rokeach, 1973). Forcing individuals to choose among values is important because values are socially desirable (Ravlin & Meglino, 1987). The degree to which fairness was an important work value to supervisors was defined as the number of times fairness was preferred over the other values. The extent to which an individual endorses fairness is based on the sum of the items that were checked that reflect fairness versus some other value.

Locus of Control. Locus of control was measured using the short form of Rotter's locus of control scale (Rotter, 1966). Example items from the scale include "Many of the unhappy things in people's lives are partly due to bad luck," and "Most people don't realize the extent to which what happens on the job is controlled by accidental happenings." Coefficient alpha for the 11-item scale was .63.

Other Variables. Supervisor age, organizational tenure, and supervisor span of control were measured by individual questions on the survey.

Procedure

Surveys were mailed to 27 supervisors employed at the university. In exchange for returning a completed survey, each respondent was paid a \$15 honorarium, and this fact was communicated in advance. Confidentiality and anonymity of individuals' responses was assured. Of the 27 supervisors to which surveys were mailed, 24 surveys were completed, representing a response rate of 89%.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the variables used in the analysis. As is often the case, the interaction term is highly correlated with at least one of the main effects (Darlington, 1990), in this case fairness orientation of the supervisor. This multicollinearity suggests the inappropriateness of standard regression approaches (see below).

The data set used for the analysis was constructed by duplicating individual difference variables (e.g., fairness orientation, age, experi-

Table 1
Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), and Intercorrelations of Study Variables^a

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Absentee's Absence History	1.50	0.50	—													
2. Absentee's Criticality	1.50	0.50	00	—												
3. Absentee's Ability to Attend	1.50	0.50	00	00	—											
4. Unapproved Absence	1.50	0.50	00	00	00	—										
5. Nonprobationary Status	1.50	0.50	00	00	00	00	—									
6. Absentee's Prior Job Performance	1.50	0.50	00	00	00	00	00	—								
7. Supervisor Age	43.67	11.68	00	00	00	00	00	00	—							
8. Supervisor Organization Tenure	14.54	8.19	00	00	00	00	00	00	56	—						
9. Supervisor Span of Control	10.92	8.52	00	00	00	00	00	00	22	-19	—					
10. External Locus of Control	42.54	6.47	00	00	00	00	00	00	14	10	17	—				
11. Supervisor Fairness Orientation	9.18	1.78	00	00	00	00	00	00	20	12	12	-04	—			
12. External Attribution	3.19	1.86	-11	00	-27	-09	05	09	00	-15	-05	28	12	—		
13. Fairness × External Attribution	37.41	19.32	-02	-01	01	-05	01	02	23	14	-01	-05	90	12	—	
14. Disciplinary Decision	2.89	1.84	23	-01	12	37	-19	-16	12	-08	10	-16	20	-16	13	—

^aDecimals are omitted from correlations. Correlations greater than .05 are significant at the .01 level (two tailed). *N* = 1,534. The six within subjects factors were coded as 1 = the factor was low and 2 = the factor was high. Correlations among the within subjects factors, and correlations between the within subjects factors and between subjects variables, are zero due to the orthogonal manipulation and randomization of the within subjects factors.

ence, span of control, and locus of control) and then appending these to the within-subject manipulations, disciplinary decisions, and supervisor attributions (70 for each individual). Conceptually, duplicating between-subject factors is appropriate because a between-subject factor can affect the respondent's reaction to each scenario. For example, fairness may influence a discipline decision each time the supervisor is presented with a hypothetical decision, much like fairness could influence discipline decisions over time (e.g., each time a supervisor is confronted with an actual disciplinary decision). Statistically, this is appropriate because each reaction to a scenario is an independent event, and each event becomes a dependent variable (Hays, 1981). Since each of the 24 supervisors made 70 discipline decisions, the sample size used for the analysis was 1,534 (70×24 , less cases deleted due to missing values).

The problem that is created when duplicating variables is that observations are no longer independent of one another. This means that there will likely be positive correlation between error terms (autocorrelation), violating an assumption of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression (Kennedy, 1985). The consequences of this violation are that while OLS is still an unbiased estimator of regression coefficients, it is no longer the maximum efficiency estimator, nor is it an unbiased estimator of the variance of regression coefficients (standard errors). Thus, standard statistical tests of regression coefficients may be biased.

Given the problem of autocorrelation, OLS estimation of standard errors is inappropriate. Therefore, generalized least squares (GLS) was used to estimate the effect of the independent variables on disciplinary decisions. GLS produces unbiased estimates of regression parameters and error terms, and thus is well-suited to deal with autocorrelated errors (Hanushek & Jackson, 1977; Judge & Bretz, 1992).

Another limitation with OLS regression, one that sometimes arises when conducting moderated regression analyses, is multicollinearity (Darlington, 1990). Multicollinearity occurs when a variable in a regression equation is highly correlated with other variables in the equation (Kennedy, 1985). This leads to unstable estimates of regression parameters and inflated standard error estimates, requiring corrective procedures such as ridge regression (Lin & Kmenta, 1982). Thus, in the present study generalized least squares estimates were performed by adding a ridge constant to the estimates (Greene, 1990).

The ridge regression results are presented in Table 2. We followed an hierarchical strategy in which the variables were entered on the basis of causal priority (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Accordingly, we entered fairness first followed by external attributions inasmuch as fairness orientation reflects a relatively stable individual difference, and the formation of attributions are likely to be situation specific. Following the entry of fairness orientation and attributions, we included the interaction between these variables.

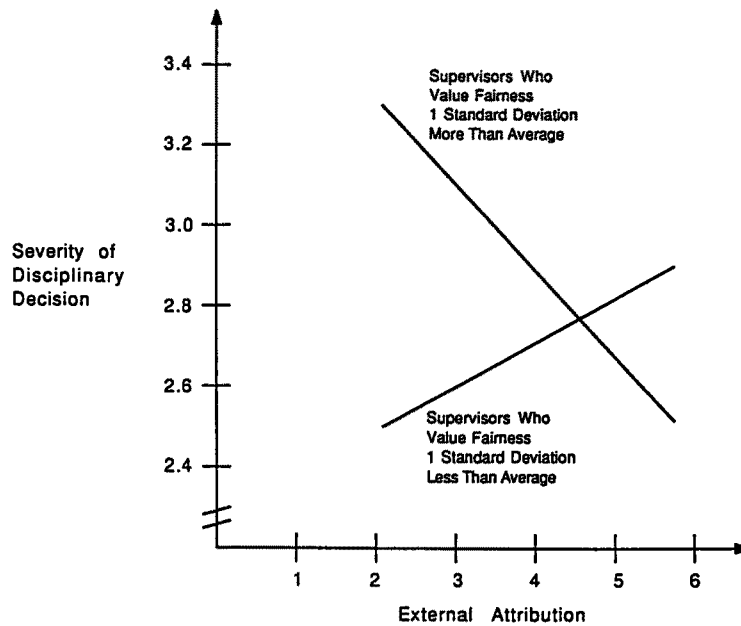
Table 2
Ridge Regression Results Predicting Disciplinary Decisions
(Generalized Least Squares)

Variable	Beta	SE
Absentee's Absence History	.220 ^a	.020
Absentee's Criticality	-.009	.020
Absentee Ability to Attend	.061 ^a	.021
Unapproved Absence	.351 ^a	.020
Nonprobationary Status	-.209 ^b	.020
Absentee's Prior Job Performance	-.129 ^b	.020
Supervisor Age	.233 ^b	.027
Supervisor Organization Tenure	-.236 ^b	.029
Span of Control	.082 ^a	.024
Supervisor External Locus of Control	-.139 ^b	.022
Fairness Orientation of Supervisor (FAIR)	.378 ^b	.051
External Attribution for Absence (EXATT)	-.132 ^b	.023
FAIR × EXATT	-.185 ^b	.051
<i>R</i> ²	.298	
Number of Observations	1,534	
Number of Supervisors	24	

^a*p* < 0.01
^b*p* < 0.001

As the table indicates, all three hypotheses were supported. Specifically, Hypothesis 1 was supported in that fairness orientation of the supervisor positively predicted the severity of disciplinary decisions. External attributions regarding the cause of employee absence negatively predicted the severity of disciplinary decisions, supporting Hypothesis 2. Finally, the interaction between fairness orientation of the supervisor and external attributions was significant. This provides support for Hypothesis 3. When entering the interaction in a hierarchical moderated regression analysis (Cohen & Cohen, 1983), the interaction explained 1% of the variance in disciplinary decision ($p < .01$) over and above the effect accounted for by the other variables. Furthermore, absentee's absence history, absentee ability to attend, approved versus unapproved absence, probationary status of the employee, and prior job performance significantly predicted disciplinary decisions. All effects were in the expected direction, consistent with past research (Martocchio, 1992). Older supervisors rendered more severe disciplinary decisions than younger supervisors. Supervisors with more tenure tended to render less severe disciplinary decisions than supervisors with lower tenure. Span of control and supervisor locus of control also exerted significant effects on disciplinary decisions; that is, supervisors whose span of control is greater and who believe they have control over what happens in their

Figure 1
Interaction Between Supervisor Fairness Orientation and External Attributions
in Predicting Absence Disciplinary Decisions



lives rendered more severe disciplinary decisions than supervisors whose span of control is less and who believe they do not have control over what happens in their lives, respectively.

The interaction is graphically represented in Figure 1. In order to facilitate interpretation of the interaction, the methods used to describe the nature of interactions in moderated regression analyses were followed (Cohen & Cohen, 1983; Stone, 1988; Stone & Hollenbeck, 1989). Specifically, the significant interaction indicates that the slope of the regression line representing the effect of external attributions on disciplinary decisions depends on the fairness orientation of the supervisor. Substituting the value of one standard deviation above the mean on the fairness measure resulted in the following equation: $\Delta Y = 2.32 - 0.19X_1$, where X_1 represents the external attributions of the supervisor. Substituting the value of one standard deviation below the mean on the fairness measure resulted in the following equation: $\Delta Y = 3.68 + 0.10X_1$. Figure 1 provides the plots of these two equations. The figure illustrates that for supervisors who value fairness more than average, external attributions lead to less severe disciplinary actions (i.e., the beta coeffi-

cient for supervisors who value fairness more than average was $-.18, p < .01$). Conversely, for supervisors who value fairness less than average, external attributions lead to *more* severe disciplinary actions, although the effect is weaker than the effect observed for supervisors who value fairness to a greater degree (i.e., the beta coefficient for supervisors who value fairness more than average was $+.13, ns$).

DISCUSSION

The present study provided supportive evidence regarding the role of fairness orientation and supervisor attributions in the absence disciplinary process. This responds to calls for more research on the role of personal characteristics of supervisors and supervisor attributions in the discipline process (Arvey & Jones, 1985; Podsakoff, 1982). The results also supported the hypothesis that fairness orientation of the supervisor moderates the relationship between supervisor attributions and disciplinary decisions.

Supervisors who placed a high value on fairness advocated more severe disciplinary decisions than those who valued fairness less. Supervisors who valued fairness may have been more willing to discipline subordinates because failing to enforce the existing discipline system is not fair to those who do not commit infractions and to the management who have put such policies into place. Progressive discipline systems are likely to be seen as fair by most supervisors; apparently supervisors who valued fairness were more motivated to comply with such policies as a result.

Furthermore, the relatively low mean of the severity of disciplinary decisions (see Table 1) suggests that there may be a leniency effect, a phenomenon which has been documented in the performance rating process (Bass, 1956; DeCotiis & Petit, 1978). This is probably due to the fact that more negative events (e.g., subordinate resentment, complaints, formal grievances, and lawsuits) derive from issuing negative ratings than positive ratings (Bernardin & Beatty, 1984). Since all of the above undesirable outcomes are also possible with respect to disciplinary decisions, many supervisors may be motivated to render lenient disciplinary decisions in the same way they are motivated to issue lenient performance ratings. However, the results of the present study suggest that supervisors who value fairness are more willing to suffer the negative consequences of severe disciplinary decisions because they may believe it is the fair (versus instrumental) thing to do.

The relevance of fairness orientation to discipline decisions provides further evidence regarding the efficacy of work values in explaining organizational attitudes and behaviors. Since research using the Ravlin

and Meglino work values typology is at an early stage, it would be useful for future research to consider the behavioral implications of other work values, and to apply fairness to other behaviors. From a practical standpoint, the effect of fairness on the severity of disciplinary decisions suggests that if an organization wishes its supervisors to use the discipline system to its fullest extent, it is important that supervisors value fairness. However, to the extent that "fair" supervisors use the discipline system to the fullest extent, it is possible that there could be some unintended consequences such as a rise in grievance activity among employees who claim that their discipline is unjust.

Stemming from grievance activity are some combination of a displacement effect (Katz, Kochan, & Weber, 1985) and a worker reaction effect (Slichter, Healy, & Livernash, 1960). The displacement effect, defined as the number of paid employee-hours needed to process the grievance that otherwise would have been devoted directly to production tasks (Katz et al., 1985), has been shown to be inversely related to productivity (Ichniowski, 1986). Disciplinary decisions that are discordant with expectations may result in a displacement effect due to increased grievance activity. The worker reaction effect refers to a change in employees' effort when they perceive that work place practices are being applied inconsistently or unfairly (Slichter et al., 1960). In the case of disciplinary decisions, employees may perceive inequity when management sanctions differ from subordinate expectations. Recently, Klaas, Heneman, and Olson (1991) found that policy grievances, which an employee uses to challenge management's interpretation of policy and contract provisions, were associated with increases in subsequent undesirable employee behavior such as unsanctioned absenteeism within work units.

The significant effect of supervisor attributions on disciplinary decisions is consistent with past research (Ashkanasy, 1989; Green & Liden, 1980). When supervisors made external as opposed to internal attributions about the cause of a particular absence incident, the disciplinary decision was less severe. This result is noteworthy given that attributions exerted a significant effect on disciplinary decisions after the influence of a series of subordinate behaviors were taken into account. The result provides more evidence for the relevance of attribution theory in disciplinary decisions.

The interaction observed was particularly interesting in that it demonstrated that for supervisors who placed a high value on fairness, external attributions were significantly negatively related to the severity of disciplinary decisions. Thus, fair supervisors apparently are more willing to consider, and perhaps empathize with, the circumstances that precipitate subordinate absence occurrences. While supervisors who value fairness were "tough" in that they render more severe disciplinary

decisions, it could also be said that they were fairer in their actions as evidenced by their willingness to take contextual factors into account when making discipline decisions.

While the organizational justice perspective has provided rich descriptions of the actions organizations can take to improve the equitable treatment of their members, researchers have not provided much information on how personal characteristics of organizational members can influence the fairness of personnel policies and outcomes. If one agrees with the premise that subordinates should not be punished for outcomes over which they have no control, the results suggest that supervisors who value fairness are more likely to provide outcomes which are distributively just than supervisors who value fairness less. This suggests a natural bond between the work values and organizational justice perspectives, and also suggests that organizational justice researchers may wish to consider work values in their research.

Given the relatively small effect sizes revealed in Table 1 and by the analyses, questions about the practical significance of the results are warranted. For example, among the largest effects on disciplinary decisions was supervisor fairness orientation (see Table 1). Fairness orientation accounted for only 4% of the variance in disciplinary decisions. Although this effect was statistically significant, the modest size of the effect suggests caution in implementing actions on the basis of the results.

Strengths and Limitations

The present study has a number of strengths and limitations that merit notice. A strength of this experimental method lies in researchers' control about which factors are relevant to the phenomenon under study, and should be incorporated in the study design. As argued by Olson et al. (1992), experimental methods have ". . . a special appeal in the case of arbitrator decision making, since theory has failed to suggest a clear set of factors that influence arbitrator preferences" (p. 712). Our review of the literature suggests that this is the case for supervisors' disciplinary responses to employee absenteeism. Thus, we believe that the results of this study provide useful information to help further our understanding of the disciplinary decision making process. Nevertheless, those who consider these results should take into account particular boundary conditions that may affect generalizability to other settings. For example, in this study, strong Civil Service rules unique to the public sector might have influenced the supervisors' responses. Although we have suggested some strengths, this study is not without limitations.

One potential limitation in the findings is external validity. Because

supervisors made hypothetical disciplinary decisions, the degree to which the results generalize to actual disciplinary decisions is unknown. However, external validity concerns with experimental studies can be mitigated by insuring that the design is realistic (Fisher, 1984). In the present study, this was accomplished by the following steps: (1) actual supervisors, who make disciplinary decisions as part of their regular responsibilities, were used as subjects; (2) the experimental treatments were realistic because the within-subjects factors were derived from a review of the relevant literature and an elicitation study of experts; and, (3) the hypothetical discipline decisions exactly corresponded to the actual choices made by supervisors in this organization.

A possible lack of external validity is also a concern because actual disciplinary decisions that are made in the field would be based on more complete information that include, for example, the alleged transgressor's testimony. Recently, Olson et al. (1992) evaluated the external validity of experimental studies by comparing the decision made in a policy capturing experiment with those made in actual cases by the same arbitrators. These researchers did not find a substantial difference in decision models derived from the experimental and field settings when the decision involved a single issue, as is the focus here. Thus, we feel that it is reasonable to examine the absence disciplinary decision making processes of employees based on an experimental design.

The ecological validity (Locke, 1986) of this research comes into question. Essentially, concerns about ecological validity arise when the phenomenon under study not only is removed from its typical setting, but also the contingencies that define the typical setting are absent. One instance for calling ecological validity into question has to do with asking supervisors to respond to a series of hypothetical scenarios in one sitting. Clearly, a supervisor's disposition of a single actual case would take a significantly longer period than the time required to respond to several brief scenarios. Also, supervisors in this study did not face the tensions that are likely to occur when the transgressor and management offers conflicting testimony, to say nothing of the difficult process of determining the credibility of these witnesses. Further, the supervisors' decisions in this study were free of the ramifications that would ensue following an actual disciplinary decision. For example, if an employee were discharged, the supervisors in this study did not have to consider the implications of this individual's inability to find employment elsewhere.

Another related limitation is that only 24 supervisors were asked to make disciplinary decisions. While this is a concern, past research has suggested that as few as ten subjects have been shown to be an adequate number to draw conclusions about decision making processes (e.g., Batsell & Lodish, 1981; Einhorn, 1971; Slovic, 1972), and valid

conclusions using policy capturing designs have been drawn about organizational phenomena based on 5 to 15 subjects (Rynes & Lawler, 1983; Rynes, Schwab, & Heneman, 1983; Sherer, Schwab, & Heneman, 1987). Furthermore, our knowledge of the organization under study leads us to believe that the sample of supervisors was representative of the population of supervisors, which should also reduce concerns over the relatively small number of participants (Luthans & Davis, 1982).

Another potential limitation in the study is the possibility of priming effects. For example, it is possible that the manipulations provided a signal to the supervisors regarding the hypotheses of the study, and the supervisors simply responded to the scenarios according to their beliefs about the researchers' expectations. While this is a legitimate concern, it is a concern that is endemic to policy capturing research in general (Judge & Bretz, 1992; Klaas & Wheeler, 1990). This increases the importance of replicating these results using a research design offering greater external validity.

Finally, because the supervisors were asked to make a large number of decisions, it is possible that respondent fatigue affected the results. There are several factors, however, that suggests this is not a serious limitation. The reliability coefficients for disciplinary decisions and supervisor attributions were acceptable, suggesting consistency in responses. Also, the within-subjects R^2 coefficients were relatively high (the average was .65), which suggests consistency in decisions (Klaas & Wheeler, 1990). Finally, the within-subjects R^2 coefficients were no lower for the second half of the scenarios than for the first half, which one would expect if fatigue were a factor.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrated that the work value of fairness is an important factor in absence disciplinary decisions. The results also supported past theory and research in showing that supervisor attributions about the causes of absence significantly influenced disciplinary decisions. The moderating effect of fairness orientation on the relationship between external attributions and disciplinary decisions suggests that supervisors who value fairness engage in different decision making processes with respect to employee discipline than those who value fairness less. These results provide support for some existing research with respect to attributions, and also provide support for a resurgent topic in the literature, the role of work values in organizational phenomena.

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