Talk as a Victim-Centered Response to Organizational Injustice: A Survey of TVET Institutions in SIAYA County

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Abstract

Organizational justice is dedicated to the study of perceptions of fairness within the workplace. Hundreds of studies converge on the notion that justice matters, such that profound negative implications arise when individuals perceive unfairness. Previous research has sought to manage and repair violations of fairness through three distinct means: Managerial excuses and justifications, training interventions for managers, and remedies distributed by the organization. There is an ironic shortcoming with this generalization: It ignores the victim who is at the centre of an injustice. Herein lays the starting point of the current study. Putting the victim back into the forefront of justice research, this study examined the role of victims of workplace injustice in their own recovery process. The study introduced talk from clinical and social psychological literatures. Recovery was construed as a victim's goal, with talk as the journey towards that goal. It asks; can victims recover from the negative effects of a fairness violation, and more specifically, can talk, that is, conversation with others, aid such a recovery process? Recovery is the emotional, cognitive and behavioral journey an individual goes through in order to work towards a resolution to their experience: It is a victim's ongoing efforts to manage an injustice. A mixed methods design incorporating interviews and survey provided support for the presence of talk in the context of workplace injustice. Findings indicate the prevalence of a type of talk that embodies an emotion and cognition component, with anger and justice needs as the trigger for talk, and outcomes such as self-efficacy, a search for solutions, increased support and optimism, and lessened anger, all representing consequences of talk relevant for victim's recovery.

Keywords: Workplace injustice • Self-efficacy • Anger • Recovery • Justice

Introduction

Organizational justice is a mature field of enquiry within the social sciences dedicated to the study of perceptions of fairness in the workplace [1]. It matters to such an extent that profound implications arise when individuals perceive unfairness at work. Employees have been documented as responding to perceptions of injustice by engaging in theft, enacting revenge, retaliation Skarlicki or sabotage Ambrose, et al. legal claiming and reporting increased turnover intentions [2]. The impact notwithstanding, there are effects on individual victims themselves including heightened negative emotions, psychological distress Tepper and sickness absence.

Herein lies the starting point of this research. It seeks to understand the aftermath of injustice through the eyes of those who experience it. In particular, it explores the process of recovery and it attempts to answer such questions as, how does the experience of one who has suffered workplace injustice unfold? How does a victim manage his recovery process, and what are the outcomes of such a process? In addressing Barclay, et al. suggestion for a test of 'interventions' that can aid recovery, this research examines talk; that is, conversation with others through spoken words. It explores if, when, and how, talk can assist victims with their recovery process following their experience of organizational injustice [3].

Recovery is a return to a normal state of health, mind or strength' (Oxford online dictionary). However, more specifically, following Barclay lead, recovery pertains to the process through which an individual manages their experience of a violation and the aftermath of that experience. Finally, one can ask; why talk as a choice of recovery intervention? Barclay outlines a framework to facilitate our understanding of the role of recovery in the justice sphere [4]. Drawing on occupational health psychology, they refer to primary, secondary and tertiary interventions. Primary interventions refer to a focus on preventing an issue (for instance preventing violations in the workplace). Secondary interventions take for granted the notion that violations will occur. Tertiary interventions seek to mitigate the harm caused by a violation [5].

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Research objectives

- To investigate whether talk follows a victim's experience of workplace injustice or not and if so, what is the content of such talk?
- To determine the recovery mechanism of talk in a workplace.

Literature Review

The theoretical springboard for the present research discusses merits of integrating a talk intervention into a justice context.

Organizational justice

The study of organizational justice, a term coined by Greenberg, is the study of individuals' perceptions of fairness in the workplace. By focusing on subjective and phenomenological concerns about fairness, organizational justice is conceived of in terms of how it is perceived by individuals, as opposed to a normative ideal [6].

Research has seen the evolution of a field of enquiry that currently construes justice along four dimensions of outcomes, procedures, interpersonal treatment and information adequacy. An employees' positive answer to the question 'was that fair?' is beneficial for organizations and management as it leads to commitment, trust and increased performance [7].

Methodology

This study deployed a multi-method approach to data collection as well as a mixed method design, given its use of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Triangulation uses different methodologies to study the same phenomenon. Specifically, this research deployed between method triangulation since it comprises the use of two research methods (interviews and surveys). This enriches researchers' knowledge about a particular phenomenon.

Data collection methods

The overall purpose of study was to gather data to confirm the presence of the phenomenon of talk in the context of workplace injustice, and on this basis, to develop a new measure of talk. Key questions, which this study asked, were:

- Does talk follows a person's experience of unfairness at work?
- If so, what is such talk? What is its composition? What is its function?

Qualitative interviews: This study conducted semi-structured interviews to attain a deeper understanding of the role of talk in a victim's recovery process. Interviews assisted with answering the first question: Does talk follow a person's experience of unfairness at work? They subsequently provided critical incidents of the content of talk. Snowballing provided the right participants for this study as it relies on an initial pool of subjects who provide names of further interested parties.

In arriving at this N, the research followed Gaskell (2000: 43) advice that "…compared to quantitative techniques, interviews are much more flexible concerning sample size…" and his principles outlined in the notion of the meaning of saturation criterion. When it got to the twenty fourth interviews, the researcher realized that participants were presenting no new insights, and that there was a confident and solid handle on the issue of talk as a recovery intervention in the context of workplace injustice [8].

Gaskell also argues for an upper limit to the number of interviews that are necessary to conduct and possible to analyze of between 15 and 25. The convenience nature of the sample did not pose any problems, since this technique allowed me accumulate a list of participants who had experienced unfairness at work, and were happy and willing to talk about their experiences. In heeding Gaskell and Bauer's advice for ensuring rigor in qualitative data, the researcher controlled for the following factors:

Transparency and procedural clarity

Equivalent to internal and external validity, the primary function of this criterion is to enable researchers reconstruct a study in order to check it or imitate it.

Corpus construction

Equivalent to representative sampling, the research ensured that data represented both study phenomenon (working professionals with experiences of unfairness) and interview saturation.

Thick description

A verbatim transcription of each interviewee ensured full description of data.

Communicative validation

In ensuring that the episodes of unfairness the interviewees highlighted were as accurate a reflection as possible, they preceded a discussion of results to ensure sufficient capture of the accounts. A follow up interview ensured that interviewees updated their validity of data initially captured. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and with permission from the interviewee, was tape recorded. This acted as an aide memoire in recalling the conversation and transcribing it verbatim. Where possible the study conducted interviews away from each individual's workplace; this was to allow them to feel comfortable talking about a potentially sensitive workplace issue [9].

Surveys: Upon confirmation of the relevance of talk in the context of workplace injustice, the study utilized an on-line survey methodology to gather further critical incidents of the content, nature and function of talk. Two online surveys were conducted using cross-sectional and convenience sampling. The first with a pool of diploma level students with prior industrial attachment experience from the Siaya institute of technology and the second, with a snowball sample of working professionals. The reason for conducting two sets of surveys was threefold. First, to gather as many critical incidents of talk as possible in order to arrive at a suitable sample size from which to build a new measure. Second, to ensure that this new measure generalized to a wide range of working personnel; the student sample provided insight into 'younger' working professionals, with the working professionals sample providing insight into a more experienced workforce [10]. Finally, both of these factors would contribute to enhanced validity and generalizability of the new measure.

This research utilized a survey methodology with two samples: Diploma students, and a convenience sample of working professionals. Both surveys were conducted online, and took between 10-18 minutes to complete. The researcher filtered out students with working experience who were all sent an online link to the survey *via* the database.

This produced 106 critical incidents of talk from the diploma student survey and 30 from the working professionals' survey. The main criterion underlying choice of participants was to ensure that those who took part had real working experience, thus providing greater validity to the results. However, a pilot study with a small snowball sample revealed this approach intrudes on participants' time, with some entries left blank [11].

Analytical methods

Qualitative interviews and survey: Analysis of study progressed in four separate phases, which utilized a different analytical technique, each befitting the nature of the data gathered. The phases were:

Phase 1 drew on general and descriptive percentage analyses to interpret data from the interviews. Reporting such statistics is in line with previous work within management sciences, which has commented on similar sets of descriptive findings.

Phase 2 deployed a critical incident technique (CIT; Flanagan, 1954) in order to gather episodes of talk. An incident is any observable human activity that permits inferences about a phenomenon under question. Flanagan argues that CIT "…does not consist of a single rigid set of rules governing…data collection…" (1954: 9). However, in following his suggestions this study repeated the same interview/survey questions to elicit the required critical incident: "Think back to a time in your workplace and recall one incident where you felt that another person treated you unfairly. The person who treated you unfairly could be your boss, a co-worker, a junior, someone from your team or someone from another department. Reflect back on this incident to describe what happened [12].

The study used Content Analysis (CA) to analyze the data drawing on procedures outlined by Bauer. The study explored the relevance of a 'talking cure' in the context of workplace injustice guided by two research questions:

- **Research question 1:** Does talk follow a person's experience of unfairness at work?
- **Research question 2:** If so, what is such talk? What is its function?

Does talk follow a person's experience of unfairness at work? In order to investigate research question 1, the research used qualitative semi-structured interviews to gather data.

Participants

The sample comprised 24 working professionals within Siaya county TVET institutions. The sample included 12 females (50 percent), with an average age of 36 years (SD=10.18). Their levels of education varied from school leaver (4; 16 percent), bachelors (10; 42 percent), and postgraduate (10; 42 percent). They had been with their employing organizations for, on average, 10.18 years (SD=10.47).

Procedure and Measures

Twenty-four semi-structured interviews occurred, 14 of which were face-to-face at the interviewees' organization or an outside meeting place; 10 were conducted over the phone. Three pilot interviews informed changes to questioning style and interview flow. The interviews began by eliciting participants' broad understanding of unfairness, before narrowing down to participants' experiences [13].

Where necessary, the research used follow up questions to probe. The following are sample questions: What does workplace unfairness mean to you? What was the impact of this unfair workplace incident on you? Did you talk about your unfair experience? If so, what did you talk about? Who did you speak to and why?

Results and Discussion

With regard to whether individuals who have suffered workplace injustice talk following their experience, 89 percent of interviewees said they spoke about their unjust experience. 100 percent of these individuals agreed positively, in response to the question 'Was talk helpful?' The most frequent conversations were with relatives/friends/partners outside of work (56 percent), followed by colleagues at work (19 percent) and line managers (10 percent). The remaining percentages saw interviewees speak with a combination of people (15 percent).

Perceptions of the unfairness of interpersonal treatment received from authority figures (interpersonal injustice) were experienced the most frequently by 43 percent of the interviewees. This followed closely by perceptions of the unfairness of decisions used to determine outcomes (procedural injustice) at 28 percent. Perceptions of the unfairness of outcomes (distributive injustice) were experienced 21 percent of the time, and finally, perceptions of unfairness relating to information not being received in a timely and open manner (informational injustice), 8 per cent of the time. Eighty one per cent of participants indicated that their line manager (supervisor) was the most frequent perpetrator of acts of injustice. Colleagues came in a distant second at (11 percent) followed closely by junior personnel at third place with (8 percent).

Methodological challenges limiting inference of causality

First, given the research design, this research cannot make assertions about the causality of findings. Causality refers to cause and effect wherein the relationship between one set of variables is deemed as being determined by another set of variables; in other words, a is caused by b. Though it is tempting to infer that there is a causal association between injustice and talk, and in turn, talk and victim centered outcomes, this study cautions against this. Results from the survey studies were cross-sectional and one-time point in nature, drawing on self-report data.

The presence of common method bias

The methodologies deployed in this research can be argued as being open to common method bias, particularly same-time same-

source bias, wherein the variance uncovered can be argued as attributable to the measurement procedure rather than the constructs of interest. Such biases can limit the generalizability of findings.

The use of same-source data

Related to the above point is the notion that the study relied on self-report data. The problems inherent with relying on such data are clear. First, such data can lead to common method variance. Second, it can lead employees to essentially fake their responses or answer in socially desirable ways. Third, participants may not be skillful enough to respond to questions, which require introspection; in the present study, for example, this may have encompassed questions relating to one's self-esteem and self-worth.

Conclusion

This research has taken a step in advancing the notion of victim centered recovery by heeding calls to explore workplace injustice through the eyes of the person experiencing it. It sought to fill a void in the justice literature, which focuses largely on what an organization or its management can do to fix and remedy an act of injustice, created often by them.

Findings indicate the prevalence of a type of talk that embodies an emotion and cognition component, with anger and justice needs as the trigger for talk, and outcomes such as self-efficacy, a search for solutions, increased support and optimism, and lessened anger, all representing consequences of talk relevant for victims. Rime concludes that it is emotions that individuals initially share following their experience of a negative or challenging encounter. Emotional discharge is paramount since it triggers a host of socio-affective benefits such as empathy, validation and shared understanding. Additionally, inhibition (that is not talking by consciously withholding thoughts and feelings about an event) can lead to a host of physical and psychological dysfunctions However, although emotional discharge is beneficial, it brings about temporary relief only. If it is not coupled with cognitive processing, emotional expression will exacerbate tension.

Articulation which gives rise to the act of processing one's experience, such that thoughts are restructured, organized, labelled and assimilated, provide one with a sense of coherence to their experience, making it more likely that they can process an event and 'move on' from it. Indeed, a 'positive' change in individuals, in the form of reduced anger, reductions in symptomatology and interpersonal distress, a sense of resolution, and improved physical and mental health is not evident until emotional discharge is coupled with cognitive processing. Otherwise, emotions may dissipate, but they do not disappear they continue to simmer below the surface, and talking about them can contribute to individuals expending physical and mental energies on continual rumination.

Limitations

Although the research endeavored to keep methodological and interpretative weaknesses to a minimum, this research has limitations. The main limitations include:
- Methodological challenges that limit inferences about causality.
- The presence of common method bias.
- The use of same-source data.
- The current lack of understanding about the extent to which talk can help with recovery.

Recommendations

This research is one of the first in providing empirical evidence for the positive role that a talk mechanism can play for victims in the context of their workplace injustice experience. As a nascent area of enquiry, however, there is still much to improve on and learn in this field. Specifically, there are four directions future research can take:
- Accounting for the role played by a significant other with who talk is initiated.
- Validating further the newly created measure of talk.
- Integrating a manager and victim-centered perspective.
- Understanding the impact of recovery on managers, in addition to victims.

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