

# Perceived Organisational Injustice and Counterproductive Behaviour: The Mediating Role of Work Alienation Evidence from the Egyptian Public Sector

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## Abstract

This study examines the relationship between the four dimensions of organisational justice, namely, distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice, and workers' counterproductive behaviour, and whether work alienation has mediating effect in this relationship. These relationships were tested in a sample of 300 blue-collar workers operating in Egyptian public industrial context, only 236 responded positively. Results revealed that there are significant relationships between organisational injustice (in its four types) and counterproductive behaviours, and each of the work alienation dimensions partially mediated this relationship. These findings were discussed in the light of extant literature. Research limitations and implications for future research were reported.

**Keywords:** organisation injustice, work alienation, counterproductive behaviour, public sector, Egypt

## 1. Introduction

Organisational justice is one of the main constructs in different multi-disciplinary areas of social sciences. It refers to the individual's perception of whether the chosen decision or taken action is morally right or fair in accordance to basic ethics, religion or law, across various contexts and cultures (Tabibnia, Satpute, & Lieberman, 2008). The issue of organisational justice and its implications is found to be of significant interest to both employers and the employees in different scope of activities, for example, industrial, agricultural, corporate or others. Researchers found that it can be associated with several positive outcomes such as higher levels of job satisfaction (Al-Zu'bi, 2010), increase commitment to the organization (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001), reciprocated trust (Hubbell & Chory - Assad, 2005), stress reduction (Vermunt & Steensma, 2003), low turnover intentions (Dailey & Kirk, 1992) and others. On the other hand, the flip-side of this construct, stated as organisational injustice, may relate to negative outcomes, such as employees' work alienation and counterproductive behaviours (CWB) that will be studied in this research paper. This study has three-folded purpose. One, it examines the effect of the negative perception of unfairness and injustice among Egyptian workers, and its associated deviant repercussions on both personal and professional levels at work place. Second, it focuses on blue-collar workers in public industrial sector, which has been a neglected area of study by many; whilst more attention was given to white-collar employees in higher paying jobs, like banks and multinational corporations. This study attempts to address this research void. Third, this is one of few studies to provide empirical support for the relationships between organisational injustice, work alienation and CWBs in a rather challenging and high risk transformational socio-economic conditions in Egypt. Said studies are sparse and are imperatively needed for improvement and betterment.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Perceived Organisational Justice and Counterproductive Behaviour (CWB)

J. Greenberg (1987) was the first to introduce the concept of *organisational justice*, which refers to the perceptions of fairness within the organisation and employees' reactions accordingly. Previous literature distinguished the multi-dimensional concept of organisational justice, namely, distributive, procedural and

interactional justice (Folger & Konovsky, 1989; Liljegren & Ekberg, 2009). Later studies then proposed the further division of the third type, which is interactional justice, into another two sub-categories, stated as informational justice and interpersonal justice (Colquitt, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001).

*Distributive justice* refers to the how economic and social goods and services are fairly distributed in the society (Lambert, Cluse-Tolar, Pasupuleti, Hall, & Jenkins, 2005). It is judged by evaluating and comparing the outcome to a standard and/or rule, such as a co-worker or even retrieving emotions from past experience (J. Greenberg, 2011). Employees' perceptions of distributive injustice takes place when their rewards and benefits are not matching with their human investment (Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan, 2005). *Procedural justice* is the seeming fair process of regulating distributive awards such as monetary or non-monetary privileges (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Therefore, implicitly distributive justice is the end towards the achievement of equality and procedural justice is its means (Lambert, Hogan, & Griffin, 2007). *Interactional justice* refers to how employees are being given the appropriate treatment (with respect and sensitivity) and/or explanations for decisions that are being made (Bies & Moag, 1986). Then, Colquitt in his validated study broke this type of justice into two more components: interpersonal and informational justice (Colquitt, 2001). *Interpersonal justice* reflects the quality of treatment that is given during the execution of procedures. *Informational justice* focuses on the given explanations, in other words, on the 'why' a certain procedure was used, or 'why' specific outcomes were distributed in that form or pattern.

*Counterproductive work behaviour (CWB)* is when the employee behaviour goes against the goals and interests of his/her employer. (Martinko, Gundlach, & Douglas, 2002). CWB embraces different negative manifestations, such as, workplace bullying, sabotage, abuse, fraud, withdrawal, and others. These forms of malicious behaviours not only impact the performance of the employee engaged in CWB, but also affect the work of other employees in the organisation and creates an anti-productive environment that attributes to multiple risks and harmful consequences. (Martinko et al., 2002; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Spector et al., 2006). Literature has ample prove that CWB is a cognition-based response to perceived organizational injustice at workplace (Devonish & Greenidge, 2010; Henle, 2005; Krischer, Penney, & Hunter, 2010)

Extant research have studied the association between organisational justice and CWB based on the social exchange theory (SET), in which it posits human relationships are based on the application of subjective cost-benefit analysis and the weighing of comparative options (Blau, 1964; Colquitt et al., 2013; Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001). Therefore employees may retaliate against their perceived unfairness or injustice against the employer in the form of CWB (Andrews & Kacmar, 2001). In the same vein, employees' displayed CWB may be explained as an implicit motivation to inflict punishment on their employer that is perceived to be unjust to them, in search for the restoration of their farfetched justice (Aquino, Lewis, & Bradfield, 1999; Kaplan, Bradley, Luchman, & Haynes, 2009). Many studies have proven the significant relationship between perceived organisational justice practices and CWBs (Devonish & Greenidge, 2010; Fox et al., 2001; Henle, 2005). The inspiration of this study was derived from the increasing counterproductive retaliations that noticeable Egyptian public blue collar workers were engaging in to voice up their perceived perception of injustice at their workplaces.

We hypothesized the following:

*Hypothesis 1:* The higher the level of organisational injustice perception among employees the higher they attempt to engage in counterproductive work behaviour.

## 2.2 Work Alienation Role As a Mediator

*Alienation* as an applied concept in social sciences, has initially originated from the work of Karl Marx during the era of industrialization (Bell, 1959; Marx & Rowbotham, 1994). Work alienation is a cognitive and social condition in which the person becomes disconnected and estranged at his/her inner self (Tummers & den Dulk, 2011). Thus, alienation is defined as an agent of dehumanization, by which the worker becomes an object responding to work rather than an influential subject capable of fulfilling himself/herself at work (Sookoo, 2014). This definition agrees with other previous researchers, namely, (Nair & Vohra, 2009), (Schacht, 1971), and (Mottaz, 1981). Workers who become victims of alienation give more importance and attention to the external or instrumental rewards (salary) than their job performance and are likely to quit their jobs (Abraham, 2000). Agarwal (1993) proved that alienated salespersons manifested an increased tendency towards negative attitudes and behaviours at workplace.

This study applies the three dimensions of Mottaz's alienation scale (Mottaz, 1981), namely, powerlessness, meaninglessness and self-estrangement. *Powerlessness* is defined as the lack of control and autonomy at workplace (Banai & Reisel, 2007; Kanungo, 1992). Alienated workers perceive denial of control on both his/her

work techniques and his/her physical movements (Leiter, 1985). Thus, powerlessness comprises workers' lack of freedom in action pertaining work process and inability to voice their influence on organizational decision making (Ashforth, 1989; Sulu, Ceylan, & Kaynak, 2010).

Previous studies have highlighted the negative consequences of these feelings of powerlessness. According to (Ceylan & Sulu, 2010; Zellars, Liu, Bratton, Brymer, & Perrewé, 2004) lack of organisational justice may contribute to workers' state of stress and work alienation. In the same vein, perception of distributive and procedural justice may deter this sense of work alienation in its powerlessness dimension among blue collar workers (Murphy, Ramamoorthy, Flood, & MacCurtain, 2006). In addition, workers who have sense of powerlessness are often prone to be engaged implicitly and explicitly in destructive behaviours such as sabotage, theft, abuse and others (Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002).

*Meaninglessness* to workers is lacking the apprehension of how their work contributes to the accomplishment and the achievement of the whole (Mottaz, 1981; Taamneh & AL-Gharaibeh). The absence of perceived organisational justice can significantly enhance this sense of meaninglessness of work among the workforce (Colquitt, 2001). Workers experiencing this negative outcome of work meaninglessness may resort to CWB directed against to the organisation (CWB-O) and/or directed against individuals within the organisation (CWB-I) (Kanungo, 1982; Seeman, 1959).

The dimension of *self-estrangement* received the greatest attention in empirical literature pertaining to work alienation. (Kohn, 1976). It is defined as the lack of self-expression and a missing feeling of identity or personal fulfilment (Taamneh & AL-Gharaibeh). Previous studies suggested the interplay among these three dimensions: powerlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement. (Ashforth, 1989; Blauner, 1964).

The rationale behind this argument is simply that self-expression in work mandates the existence of a certain degree of autonomy and a sense of purpose to perform required task(s). When these factors are absent, workers are then unable to utilize their abilities nor to feel a sense of attachment or work fulfilment (Mottaz, 1981). Thus, to them job is neither rewarding nor engaging in itself, but solely an instrumental duty (Blauner, 1964).

Studies have found that work alienation is positively related to deviance and CWB, as with theft (Zeitlin, 1971), sabotage at work (Jermier, 1988), problem alcohol behaviour (E. S. Greenberg & Grunberg, 1995). For example, in Zeitlin's analysis to employee-thieves intentions and motivations, he concluded that said thieves, who feel alienated at work may resort to creative deviant behaviour or innovative counterproductive activities to make their jobs more interesting and enriching to them. (Zeitlin, 1971) In other words, they steal the company's property to practice decision making autonomy, in choosing what to steal, and seek innovation in their jobs by creating techniques to evade the risks of being caught (Shantz, Alfes, Bailey, & Soane, 2015).

In the light of the above explanation, this study proposes that the three dimensions of work alienation (powerlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement) have mediating role between the multi-dimensions of organisational justice and CWBs.

We hypothesized the following:

*Hypothesis 2:* Work alienation will mediate the relationship between perceived organisational injustice and CWB.

### 3. Conceptual Model

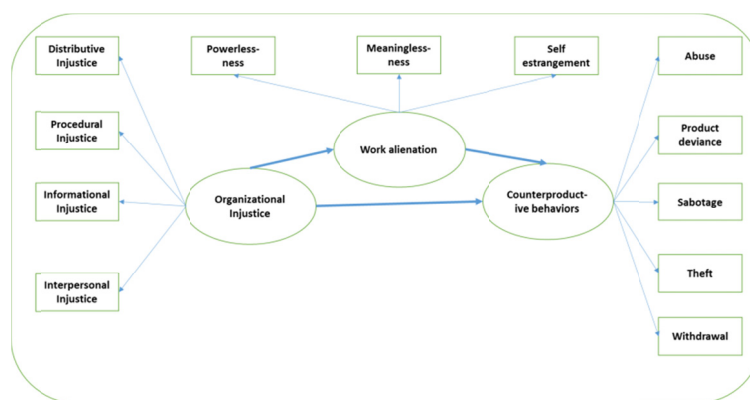


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the proposed hypotheses

This figure describes the mediating role of work alienation between organisational injustice and CWB relationship.

#### 4. Methodology

##### 4.1 Sample and Procedure

The target population in this study was blue collar workers in a public industrial complex in Greater Cairo region. A quota sampling procedure was used to recruit three-hundred employees. Only two-hundred and thirty-six workers responded positively with a response rate of (78.6%). Their main characteristics are shown in table1.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Age	M = 37.25 years $\pm$ SD = 8.13 years
Work Experience	M = 12.71 years $\pm$ SD = 6.28 years
Gender	
- Male	76.4%
- Female	23.6%
Education	
- Less than high school	13%
- High school	58.5%
- University degree	28.5%

These characteristics indicate a reasonable mix of demographic groups represented in the collected data.

Each participant responded to a questionnaire that contained the measures of this study variables specifically prepared for the data collection. Before completing the questionnaire, all participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and anonymity was guaranteed. They were informed that they were participating in a study designed to understand how they evaluated their working conditions at different stations and locations.

The construction of the instrument observed several criteria to minimize and control the impact of potential systematic errors (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Major concerns were focused on controlling errors derived from: (1) items characteristics (item adaptation had in consideration the need to be clear and specific); a five point scale was used in order to have metric gains as the equidistance between all points of the scale were assured (Foddy, 1994); some items were reversed in order to avoid acquiescence error; (2) context of the items (the instrument dimension was optimized in order to exclusively accomplish the study purposes; combinations of items of different constructs in the same sections of the questionnaire). Moreover, Latin square procedure was used to control the order of presenting the three-part questionnaire and to minimize the common method bias.

##### 4.2 Measures

Three-part questionnaire was used to assess the variables of this study. *Organisational injustice* was measured using 20 items scale developed by (Colquitt, 2001) to assess four dimensions of organisational injustice, namely, distributive injustice (4 items), procedural injustice (7 items), interpersonal injustice (4 items), and informational injustice (5 items). Colquitt's original scale items was converted to negative statements to measure the degree of perceived injustices. The scale items were measured on a five-point Likert scale. Answers ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The *counter-productive behaviour* was measured using the 32 item scale adapted from (Spector et al., 2006) to assess five types of counterproductive behaviours, namely, sabotage (3 items), product deviance (3 items), withdrawal (4 items), theft (5 items), and abuse (17 items). Response choices ranged from 1 (Never) to 5 (Every day). Finally, *work alienation* was measured using 21 items scale developed by (Mottaz, 1981) to assess three dimensions of work alienation, namely, powerlessness (7 items), meaninglessness (7 items), and self-estrangement (7 items). The items were measured using a five-point scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Demographic variables including age, gender, education, and work experience were also assessed. Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficient of these measures are shown in table (2).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients of the study variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Organizational Injustice	49.53	8.87	.92
- Distributive	16.67	7.43	.87
- Procedural	9.45	4.32	.83
- Informational	11.59	5.45	.83
- Interpersonal	11.81	5.91	.84
Counter-productive behaviour	40.70	9.41	.93
- Sabotage	3.61	1.55	.78
- Product deviance	3.81	1.74	.87
- Withdrawal	5.21	2.23	.87
- Theft	6.28	2.72	.90
- Abuse	21.79	6.49	.93
Work alienation	42.23	8.77	.88
- Powerlessness	15.04	5.35	.84
- Meaninglessness	12.39	4.61	.79
- Self-estrangement	14.81	5.49	.83

### 4.3 Results

To test the first hypothesis that proposes that there are significant relationships between organisational injustice (in its four types) and counterproductive behaviours, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to measure the strength and the direction of associations among study variables.

Table 3. Pearson correlation coefficients between organisational injustice and counterproductive behaviours

	Distributive	Procedural	Informational	Interpersonal	Organisational Injustice
Sabotage	.41**	.52**	.43**	.40**	.55**
Product deviance	.54**	.48**	.42**	.45**	.57**
Withdrawal	.32**	.52**	.41**	.51**	.52**
Theft	.52**	.68**	.38**	.46**	.65**
Abuse	.47**	.51**	.39**	.45**	.48**
CWB	.48**	.55**	.41**	.47**	.66**

\*\* Correlation is significant at 0.01 level.

Based on the reported results, it is possible to verify that all aspects of organisational injustice are positively correlated with all dimensions of counterproductive behaviours. As expected, these evidences provide support for the study's first hypothesis.

To test the mediation effects proposed in this study's second hypothesis, we adopted (Baron & Kenny, 1986) linear regression method. **Table 4** summarises the results of hierarchical regression analysis that was conducted to investigate the mediating effect of work alienation in the relationship between organisational injustice and counterproductive behaviours.

It can be shown from the hierarchical regression analysis that work alienation partially mediate, since the regression coefficient does not lose its significance, the relationships between organisational injustice and counterproductive behaviour. Such evidence provides support for the study's second hypothesis.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression analysis to test the mediating effects of work alienation in the relationship between organisational injustice and counterproductive behaviour

Independent variable(s)	R-square	F	B	t
Organisational injustice	.31	29.65**	.682	17.42**
Organisational injustice + work alienation	.38	36.47**	.453	12.69**
			.371	9.68**

The dependent variable is counterproductive behaviour; \*\* Regression is significant at 0.01 level.

Moreover, **Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) technique** was used to fit the collected data to the conceptual model as can be shown in **Table 5**.

Structural Paths	Path Coefficient	t-value	Sig
Organisational injustice -----Distributive	.656	4.56	.001
Organisational injustice -----Procedural	.416	3.62	.001
Organisational injustice -----Informational	.397	2.85	.001
Organisational injustice -----Interpersonal	.406	2.92	.001
Work alienation -----Powerlessness	.866	5.27	.001
Work alienation -----Meaninglessness	.968	6.81	.001
Work alienation -----Self-estrangement	.775	5.84	.001
CWB-----Product deviance	.425	3.75	.001
CWB-----Sabotage	.551	4.87	.001
CWB-----Theft	.482	4.12	.001
CWB-----Withdrawal	.625	5.13	.001
CWB-----Abuse	.674	5.55	.001
Organisational injustice -----CWB	.578	4.92	.001
Organisational injustice -----Work alienation	.555	4.89	.001
Work alienation -----CWB	.611	5.09	.001

The fitted model has some good fit indices with all the fit-indices better than the recommended cut-off values ( $\chi^2/df = 2.41$ ; RMSEA = .055; CFI = .97; NFI = .96; GFI = .98; AGFI = .96). The total effect of the organisational injustice-CWB path was .682 with direct effect of .501 and indirect effect of .181. The results of SEM analysis add more support to the previous correlation and regression analyses.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Results showed that the four dimensions of organisational injustice had strong effects on workers' counterproductive behaviour. Also, research findings revealed that dimensions of work alienation partially mediated the relationship between organisational injustice and CWB. Most specifically, the findings of this study emphasised that procedural and informational injustice had stronger effects on workers' CWB, while distributive and interpersonal injustice showed a weaker effect. These results were in partial agreement with the previous findings of Judge and Colquitt (Judge & Colquitt, 2004), in which they found that procedural justice and interpersonal justice were the main forces that affected employees' perceptions of workplace stress. In the Egyptian context, we enhanced their findings with alteration by demonstrating that procedural justice had the strongest impact on blue collar workers (skilled or semi-skilled individuals) followed by informational justice, distributive justice, and interpersonal justice, respectively. Multiple negative phenomena infect the Egyptian public sector, namely, scarcity in the available resources, low productivity levels, and over-employment in most industrial sectors. In other words, too many are competing for too little. This justifies workers' primary concern in perceiving the 'how' (procedural justice) and the 'why' (informational justice) financial and non-financial awards and privileges are being allocated in their workplace.

In conformity with previous research conducted among healthcare professionals in Turkey (Ceylan & Sulu, 2011; Sulu et al., 2010) procedural injustice in the Egyptian context also showed stronger impact on the three dimensions of work alienation. In accordance to both models: the control model of justice and the group-value model, workers who lack a 'voice' or are excluded from the decision-making process become powerless and develop a sense of isolation. (Ceylan & Sulu, 2011). In the same vein, an unfair procedure enhances workers' feeling of inferiority within the group and promotes their tendency to experience meaninglessness and self-estrangement at work (Sulu et al., 2010).

The key contribution of this study is to identify the importance of enhancing informational justice in work procedures for blue-collar workers in public sector, who may be literate or semi-literate and are not treated with equal respect as white-collar professionals in most developing countries. Transparency and informational justice pertaining to work procedures and outcomes for these workers will give them a sense of importance, collective pride, and individual dignity in what they are doing. Contending with previous research if said information is carefully and constructively communicated in a timely manner, workers will be less prone to engage in CWB or retaliate by either damaging organisational public property (equipment or machinery) or by violating regulations (Huong et al., 2016).

## 6. Practical Implications

The results of this study have interesting implications for practice. First, we suggest that public sector administrators need to focus on creating an organisational justice climate in the workplace by exerting sincere efforts and resources to diminish the perceptions of organisational injustice in the work place aiming towards minimising the manifestation of CWB. For example, providing continuous training and career development programs to managers and supervisors to equip them to lead by setting good examples and assisting them to be credible role models to their subordinates (Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007; Liao & Rupp, 2005). Second, the public sector, like the private sector, needs to execute instrumental and punitive measures (procedural justice) to match different remedies to different wrongs, encompassing all workforce without discrimination or exceptions (Reb, Goldman, Kray, & Cropanzano, 2006). Moreover, awareness and clarity of CWB negative outcomes and damaging repercussions may reduce its occurrence among workers (informational justice). Once being told of their CWB, some workers due to their feeling of guilt and remorse may become more disciplined and take positive discretionary actions, such as embracing organisational citizenship behaviour, in order to compensate for their misdeeds and CWB and resort to an improved status of moral self-respect (Ilies, Peng, Savani, & Dimotakis, 2013; Wu et al., 2016). Third, the public sector to gain competitive advantage should adopt proactive counselling treatments and HR interventions to monitor levels of work alienation among workers, as feeling alienated to work after unfairness may result in their engagement in CWB. Said studies can be later utilised as references for HR practices and work-improvement plans (Whiteside & Barclay, 2013).

## 7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Like other research, this study has a few limitations. First the sample size is to a certain extent small. Second, there was also gender imbalance in data collection. Evidence has shown an over representation of men in this sample (almost 76%) which might affect the generalisation of the results in other areas and contexts. A selection of a more gender balanced sample could help address this issue in future studies on similar topics. Third, for purposes of academic generalisation, data should be obtained from both public and private sectors, and must cover other activities, such as health, education, banking, and others in Egypt. Finally, organisational justice and CWB remain to be discreet and sensitive topics in the Egyptian culture. Egyptians are prone to socially desirable responses and are unwilling to admit that they perform CWB out of fear of being caught or penalised. We suggest that the researcher use a behavioural observation method in addition to self-report surveys to assess CWB in Egyptian organisational settings.

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