

Who pays attention to the moral aspects? Role of organizational justice and moral attentiveness in leveraging ethical behavior

Leveraging
ethical
behavior

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Abstract

Purpose – Although there have been several studies on corporate justice and employee ethical behavior, little is known about the conditions in which this link develops. The purpose of this study is to investigate the direct effect of organizational justice and moral attentiveness toward employee ethical behavior. Importantly, this study also considers the moderating role of moral attentiveness on the links between organizational justice and employee ethical behavior.

Design/methodology/approach – The data was collected from 350 employees who were assessed directly to supervisors in 12 manufacturing companies placed in Malaysia, operated full-time, and had regular interaction with their direct supervisors. In particular, using two-wave survey data obtained from 270 employees working in the manufacturing industry in Malaysia.

Findings – Results showed that organizational justice and moral attentiveness positively impact the employee ethical behavior as predicted. New to the literature, findings disclose that moral attentiveness strengthens this relationship. Importantly, the positive impact of organizational justice is sharply positive under high than low moral attentive employees and ceases to be significant among low morally attentive personnel.

Research limitations/implications – This research focused on the notion of ethics and how important it is for society. The principles, norms and ideals that guide an individual's behavior are referred to as ethics. Because the authors need to be treated with dignity as human beings, ethical behavior is essential in society.

Practical implications – The findings of this study send a clear signal to managers that “failing to ensure that their employees perceive organizational justice” may undermine every effort made by them to improve their organizations' ethical quality. Importantly, the findings emphasize the role of moral attentiveness in improving the ethical behavior of employees both directly and by strengthening the effectiveness of organizational justice to impact such a behavior positively. So, given the advantages of moral attentiveness in terms of improving employee ethical conduct, businesses should make every effort to hire and choose people who meet this requirement because it is not easy to spot this personality trait. Human resource managers may assess candidates' moral attentiveness using a range of methods such as group debate, an in-basket exercise, organized interviews and business games that concentrate on specific ethical concerns.

Social implications – This research focused on the notion of ethics and how important it is for society. The principles, norms and ideals that guide an individual's behavior are referred to as ethics. Because the authors need to be treated with dignity as human beings, ethical behavior is essential in society.

Ethical approval: Researchers conduct studies involving human participants per institutional and national research committee's ethical standards and the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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Originality/value – The results of this study demonstrate how the eye is put to attain organizational moral excellence; the outcomes have shown that acutely attentive employees to the moral cues offered by the organization is vital.

Keywords Organizational justice, Employee ethical behavior, Moral attentiveness, Moral issues

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Recent ethical scandals (i.e. Deutsche Bank, the London Interbank Offered Rate, Volkswagen) have led to accusations that businesses are engaging in unethical practices have piqued people's interest in learning more about the causes of such moral failure (Al Halbusi and Tehseen, 2017; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2020a). Because the behavior of all the members of the organization is the principal indicator of the ethical quality of an organization, one of these sources has to do with all those factors, both internal and external, which can lead to employees to develop unethical behaviors in the workplace. Hence, employee ethical conduct can be influenced by a variety of factors, which must be observed and defined to prevent problems (Mitchell *et al.*, 2017; Wiernik *et al.*, 2018; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2020b). Among this fairness is one of the most significant factors influencing workers' right behaviors is their views of the fairness that exists in their workplaces (Ambrose and Schminke, 2009; Colquitt *et al.*, 2001; Karam *et al.*, 2019). Because justice is profoundly entrenched in every individual's ethical assumption (Moardi *et al.*, 2016; Rounaghi, 2019; Pratono, 2019), it is no surprise that organizational justice, defined as employees' perceptions of distributive, procedural, interpersonal treatment and informational fairness in the organization (O'Keefe *et al.*, 2019), becomes a fundamental virtue and a principal ethical concern of employees concerning what they seek to fulfill from and in their organizations (Treviño *et al.*, 2014). Nevertheless, despite present works signifying a positive association among organizational justice and employee ethical conduct (Shah *et al.*, 2017; Ko *et al.*, 2018; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2017; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2019), yet there are inconclusive results on this relationship (Cho and Tak, 2009). Hence, further research is needed to uncover which potential variables could be masking this relationship.

One person-related variable that could play a significant role in this association is moral attentiveness. In fact, the latest evidence into the cognitive processing of moral cues indicates that employees' levels of exposure to ethical issues vary (Hannah *et al.*, 2011; Reynolds and Ceranic, 2009; Zhu *et al.*, 2016), and these variances are taken by moral attentiveness, the degree to which an individual chronically observes and considers morality and moral essentials in his or her experiences (Reynolds, 2008). With a higher level of moral attentiveness, individuals can pay more attention to ethics, internalize ethical prototypes about how to solve ethical dilemmas and perform in terms of ethics far better (Wurthmann, 2013; Sturm, 2018). Besides, with higher moral attentiveness, the sensitivity of members to moral signals improves, thus given that the core aspect of organizational justice is the fairness of moral cues, the relations between organizational justice on employee ethical behavior may be conditional on this trait (i.e. moral attentiveness). The primary research goal is thus to expound on the role of organizational justice in the positive association between organizational justice and employee moral behavior and how moral attentiveness can help explicate this relationship. To this end, this study initially inspects the positive effects of organizational justice (organizational variable) and moral attentiveness (individual variable) on employee ethical behavior. Then, explore the moderating (strengthening) role of moral attentiveness in the organizational justice-employee ethical behavior relationship and

thus shed light on “when” organizational justice is most effective in impacting employee ethical behavior positively.

All these efforts advance prior research by adding to the scarce literature concerning the positive role of moral attentiveness in explaining employee ethical behavior. Although previous research has found a positive association of this trait with aspects intimately related to ethical decision-making (i.e. moral awareness, Reynolds, 2008; moral imagination, Whitaker and Godwin, 2013), other studies fail to do so or ignore the analysis of this direct relationship (i.e. van Gils *et al.*, 2015). The current study is one of the few that tests this relationship directly to help shed light on this relationship. More importantly, the current study represents an important contribution to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Fiske, 1993) in which the concept of moral attentiveness is rooted upon (Reynolds, 2008) and to the existing organizational-individual interactionist perspective to explain how ethical behavior is developed in organizations or other social contexts (Treviño, 1986; Treviño *et al.*, 2006; O’Keefe *et al.*, 2019). While social cognitive theory understands that behavior is a function of individuals, the stimuli received and the interaction of two (Bandura, 1986), the organizational-individual interactionist perspective (i.e. Treviño, 1986) assumes that ethical behavior is explained by the interaction of both these types of variables. With this study, this study contributes to both theories by identifying the boundary conditions on which the organizational justice-employee ethical behavior rests upon. Furthermore, this study responds to previous calls to investigate the potential moderating role of moral attentiveness in accounting for ethical behavior in organizations (Zhu *et al.*, 2016). To my knowledge, only van Gils *et al.* (2015) studied this role of moral attentiveness, and they did it in the relationship between unethical supervision (at the group level) and deviant behavior by finding that moral attentiveness could make employees respond to unethical supervisors with a stronger unethical behavior. This investigation is different from that of van Gils *et al.’s* (2015) in that it evaluates how a different level constructs, an organizational construct such as organizational justice, impacts the ethical behavior of high versus low morally attentive employees, which would help add evidence on the predictable strengthening role of moral attentiveness in explaining the impact of the context on employee ethical behavior. This study will thus indicate to general managers “when” their efforts to make that justice is perceived in the outcomes, procedures, interpersonal treatment and information received within the organization (i.e. organizational justice) can help most to enhance ethical behavior in the workplace. It would allow offering critical cues to managers on “when” to better leverage their efforts to gain a reputation of a just or fair organization, and thus help these managers to gain compelling insights on the specific actions that they can take (i.e. to gain or have a highly morally attentive workforce) to ensure that organizational justice can enhance their organizations’ ethical quality, from top to down.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1 Organizational justice and employee ethical behavior

Individuals are genuinely concerned about how they are treated and how justice is reflected in their workplace’s procedures, achievements, personal experiences and knowledge. Fairness and justice attitudes in the workplace (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997; Greenberg, 1990; O’Keefe *et al.*, 2019), organizational justice encompasses four key components: distributive, procedural, interpersonal and informational (Colquitt, 2001). The first component is distributive justice, which is related to Adams’s (1963) equity theory and addresses the equitable allocation of consequences depending on each individual employee’s performance (Burney *et al.*, 2009; Steensma and Visser, 2007; Salehi *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b).

Another component is procedural justice, which pertains to the perceived fairness of the methods, procedures and policies that are used to determine outcomes or resource allocations (Ambrose and Schminke, 2009; Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 2001). When it comes to organizational justice, interpersonal treatment is equally crucial; this component emphasizes the quality of treatment (i.e. respectful, with dignity) received in interpersonal interactions with others, particularly with supervisors (Bies and Moag, 1986). Finally, informational justice is an element of organizational justice that relates to whether important information is received in a timely, accurate and unbiased way (Colquitt, 2001).

With the perception of organizational justice, the ethical behavior of employees can be positively impacted. In effect, all these components have a positive impact on the behavior of employees, principally by triggering social exchange processes associated with social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). For instance, when distributive and procedural justice is apparent, the settings at work should be perceived as further encouraging distributive justice (Oshio and Kobayashi, 2009), with employees also perceiving that they have some voice in making decisions procedural justice (Lind and Tyler, 1988). Therefore, drawn on SET, reciprocity could be derived (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960) and lead employees to respond with positive behaviors to the organization, such as ethical behavior (Shah *et al.*, 2017; McCain *et al.*, 2010). The same holds true for interpersonal justice and informational justice. When employees perceive that leader treats them fairly (interpersonal justice) and that they receive accurate and honest information concerning the idiosyncrasies of the organization (informational justice), they are likely to believe that their employer and leader appreciate and respect them as persons, and a social exchange processes scenario is likely to emerge. Employees in such a situation are more likely to trust their bosses and hence feel obligated to repay them (Colquitt *et al.*, 2007), with behaviors that benefit the company as well, making them less inclined to act unethically (Mayer *et al.*, 2009).

General, organizational justice includes important ingredients of ethical behavior (Lind, 2001), and whether it is perceived by employees, ethical behavior will be favored, as a feeling of obligation to reciprocate with such a behavior is likely to be developed among employees (El Akremi *et al.*, 2010). Employees need that procedures, information, treatment and outcomes within the organization become known and rooted upon justice; it is, in fact, a vital element for employees' well-being (Lin *et al.*, 2009; Roch *et al.*, 2019). Being just shows the organization's integrity to its employees, who are more likely to be fostered in the belief that ethics is a critical compass in their work. Otherwise, they are likely to be skeptical about their organization's actual interest and concern for their needs as individuals, and may likely act immorally to achieve their own goals due to perceived injustice and a lack of moral principles in their organization (Demirtas, 2015; Karam *et al.*, 2019; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2021a), it is unlikely that the workforce will trust the relationship with their organization if they find out that procedures, outcomes, interpersonal treatment and information displayed in the organization are not adhered to justice principles. Thus, based on the above argumentations, they postulate that organizational justice is a positive for employee ethical behavior. Employees operating in equal settings are more willing to assume that organizational fairness is true, making social exchange processes easier (Colquitt *et al.*, 2007; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2021b), leading employees to involve in positive actions such as ethical behavior (Ko *et al.*, 2018). Thus, we theorized as follows:

H1. Perceived organizational justice is positively related to employee ethical behavior.

2.2 Moral attentiveness and employee ethical behavior

Individuals' ethical behavior can be influenced by person-related aspects in the situation (Craft, 2013). Moral attention, which Reynolds coined based on social cognitive theory

(Bandura, 1986) as the amount to which morality is perceived in day-to-day situations, is one individual difference that could have anything to do with ethical behavior (Reynolds, 2008).

Moral attentiveness is a relatively recent idea in the ethics literature (Reynolds, 2008; Wurthmann, 2013), and it has gotten a lot of attention from academics in the previous 10 years (van Gils *et al.*, 2015; Zhu *et al.*, 2016; Dawson, 2018). Moral attentiveness, in its two important basic aspects (perceptual and reflective), is likely to have a favorable impact on ethical behavior because it causes people to reason about and perceive morality on a regular basis (Reynolds, 2008; Wurthmann, 2013). In effect, the possession of this trait makes individuals interpret information that they have through an ethical lens (i.e. perceptual moral attentiveness) and reflect back on their experiences from an ethical outlook prior to making decisions (i.e. reflective moral attentiveness, Reynolds, 2008), so it is no surprise that these individuals become more prone to make good ethical decisions. Previous research has found a strong link between this feature and characteristics that are closely related to ethical decision-making. Moral attention, for instance, has been linked to moral imagination, and hence to the ability to contemplate and evaluate new options in terms of moral worth and positive ethical impact (Whitaker and Godwin, 2013). Also, moral attentiveness has been observed to be positively related to the perception that ethics and social responsibility are outstanding to be effective in business (Wurthmann, 2013), which Dawson (2018) claims as a necessary condition for an individual to behave ethically. In addition, moral attentiveness is said to be closely related to moral awareness, that is, the ability of an individual to recognize that a situation encompasses moral content and requires from an ethical-lens based evaluation (Reynolds, 2006), which is critical to make ethical decisions (van Gils *et al.*, 2015). Finally, recent research has also displayed how moral attentiveness could be positively related to having ethical prototypes about different ethical issues (e.g. lying, deceiving, cheating) internalized in their minds, and therefore normative evaluations (i.e. the extent to which the issue in question is in line with moral standards) and prescriptive recommendations (i.e. how to act and react to this issue), which would help to promote the making of ethical decisions (Sturm, 2018). Overall, as shown by the preceding rationales and evidence, moral attentiveness could be positively related to ethical behavior. While perceptual moral attentiveness is linked to higher moral imagination and the possession of ethical prototypes on how to act on ethical dilemmas, reflective moral attentiveness is positively associated with perceptions that ethics is important in business and also with higher moral awareness levels (Sturm, 2018; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2021a). Thus, we hypothesized accordingly:

H2. Moral attentiveness is positively related to employee ethical behavior.

2.3 The pivotal role of moral attentiveness

To understand how ethical behavior evolves, a prominent research line in the literature involves an interaction of individual characteristics with the environment or context (Treviño, 1986; O'Keefe *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, Reynolds (2008), drawn on the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Fiske, 1993), suggests that ethical behavior could be caused by the interaction of some person-related factors with other contextual factors that offer external stimuli. Thus, given that moral attentiveness refers to the extent to which one pays attention to moral cues of the close context (van Gils *et al.*, 2015; Al Halbusi *et al.*, 2021a), this trait could interact with organizational justice perceptions to explain employee ethical behavior. While the possession of this trait could make individuals become more likely to pay attention to the existing immediate moral cues, its absence would lead individuals to become indifferent to the moral cues that the context releases. Therefore, the extent to which

individuals are more or less morally attentive could be a potential explanation of the different ways a person reacts to the context (van Gils *et al.*, 2015; Ko *et al.*, 2018), or as it is the case in this study, to the perceived fairness in the procedures executed and the outcomes, interpersonal treatment and information received by employees within the organization.

Given that people's behavior is always filtered by their cognitive schemas and the processes through which they perceive their environmental conditions (Whitaker and Godwin, 2013), the higher the level of moral attentiveness possessed, the greater the employees' curiosity about moral issues and the greater the vividness and salience of these issues to these individuals' eyes and minds. Hence, given the higher agility with which high morally attentive employees can encode moral information (Bargh and Thein, 1985), in an automatic manner (Bargh, 1989), situational cues, such as those available as a consequence of perceived organizational justice, should enhance the ethical behavior of these individuals (Giessner and van Quaquebeke, 2010; Ko *et al.*, 2018). High morally attentive employees are more likely than low morally attentive employees to have a stronger preference for ethics-based concerns such as justice (Reynolds, 2008). As a result, organizational justice's positive impact on employee ethical behavior is more likely to be stronger in high morally attentive employees than in low morally attentive employees. On the contrary, given the low morally attentive employees' predicted lack of sensitivity to moral cues, the fact that organizational fairness is seen in their organization could become sterile in explaining and predicting these employees' ethical behavior. So, the following hypothesis was suggested:

- H3.* The positive relationship between perceived organizational justice and employee ethical behavior is stronger for followers who are high rather than low in moral attentiveness.

In essence, all the above-mentioned three hypotheses together help build a theoretical perspective that explains the occurrence of ethical behavior in the workplace. Figure 1 shows the research model to be tested in this study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and procedure

The data was collected from 350 employees who assessed directly to supervisors in 12 manufacturing companies placed in Malaysia, operated full-time and had regular interaction with their direct supervisors. To reduce the likelihood of common method variance (CMV), the surveys were distributed in two-waves of as recommended (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2013, 2012). In the first wave, participants filled their demographic details and their organizational

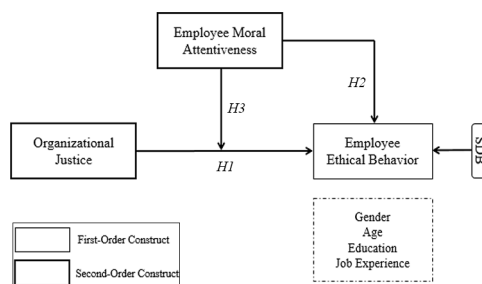


Figure 1.
Research framework

Note: SDB = social desirability bias

fairness perceptions. In the second wave, later three weeks had passed, these respondents assessed their level of moral attentiveness and ethical conduct. A cover letter was also given to the respondents, who were ensured of full confidentiality and told of the importance of their participation in this research, which may help minimize the social desirability bias (SDB) and CMV (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2013, 2012). The responses on both sets of surveys were coded to ensure that they could be linked; overall, 270 valid responses were received, with a response rate of 77%. As found that 74.4% of the respondents were men and 25.6% women, with the biggest number (41.9%) falling between the ages of 31 and 40. In terms of educational achievement and work experience, the majority of participants (55.9%) had a bachelor's degree and had worked in the same business for 6–10 years (75%).

3.2 Measurement of the variables

Prior to distributing the survey to the respondents, the survey was checked with six experts in the field of ethics and justice; the survey questions were also checked and validated through cognitive interviews with 18 manufacturing industry workers, who recommended minor changes and validated the questionnaire's clarification, readability, comprehension and appropriateness. The questionnaires were provided to workers with at least six months of experience in their organizations to obtain credible answers. All these processes were before and after using Brislin's (1980) process for translating survey objects into Malayan and confirming semantic equivalence with their English counterparts. Nevertheless, the nature of the variables for this study enabled led to differentiate first- (i.e. employee ethical behavior, SDB) and second-order constructs (i.e. organizational justice, employee moral attentiveness), captured in Mode A (reflective) constructs, as recommended (Hair *et al.*, 2017; Sarstedt *et al.*, 2019). Thus, all measures relied on five-point Likert response formats, and except organizational justice (1 = to a small extent" to "5 = to a large extent), all were based on the respondent's level of agreement on each item (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Table 1 shows the items of the main study variables.

3.2.1 Organizational justice. This variable was measured using 20 items from Colquitt's (2001) scale, which refer to "distributive justice," "procedural justice," "interpersonal justice" and "informational justice." Distributive Justice was measured using four items which concentrate on equal payment, promotion, sufficient recognition and rewards. A sample item is "Does your outcome reflect the effort you have put into your work?". For Procedural Justice, seven-items were used, all of which are intended to determine the degree to which policies and standards are followed fairly and uniformly across the company. Three-items showed poor loadings (far lower than 0.40, Hair *et al.*, 2017), so they were dropped. Interpersonal Justice was assessed using a four-item scale concerning employees' interaction with their manager and whether or not their manager treats them with respect and politeness. Finally, for informational justice, five-items have been used to assess how well the authority figure followed the policies in relation to the information given. With all these four scales, a Mode A second-order composite (hierarchical common factor) was built, where all justice components represent lower-order constructs that are reflectively measured (Becker *et al.*, 2012).

3.2.2 Employee moral attentiveness. This variable was measured using Reynolds's (2008) 12-item scale, which includes both perceptual (7 items) and reflective (5 items) dimensions. The perceptual dimension refers to screening incoming information according to a moral perspective; the reflective dimension refers to using morality to consider and reflect on information (Reynolds, 2008). In one slight change to Reynolds's (2008) scale, items reworded a negatively framed item ("I rarely face ethical dilemmas") to make it positive ("I always face ethical dilemmas"), as recommended in the pre-test. Both dimensions combined

Table 1.
Measurement model,
loading, construct
reliability and
convergent validity

1st-order constructs	2nd-order constructs	Items	Items description	Loading (>0.5)	CA (>0.7)	CR (>0.7)	AVE (>0.5)
Distributive justice	Rate the following items regarding the outcome(s) (e.g. rewards, pay, promotion) you receive from your organization. To what extent...	DJ1	Does your outcome reflect the effort you have put into your work?	0.662	0.750	0.841	0.570
		DJ2	Is your outcome justified, given your performance?	0.755			
		DJ3	Is your outcome appropriate for the work you have completed?	0.800			
		DJ4	Does your outcome reflect what you have contributed to the organization?	0.795			
Procedural justice	Rate the following items regarding the procedures used to arrive at your outcome(s). To what extent...	PJ1	Have you been able to express your views and feelings during those procedures?	0.685	0.707	0.818	0.531
		PJ2	Have those procedures been applied consistently?	0.696			
		PJ3	Have those procedures been based on accurate information?	0.805			
		PJ4	Have those procedures upheld ethical and moral standards?	0.722			
Interpersonal justice	Rate the following items regarding the authority figure (i.e. superior) who enacted the procedure. To what extent...	InterPJ1	Has your supervisor treated you in a polite manner?	0.853	0.747	0.840	0.572
		InterPJ2	Has your supervisor treated you with dignity?	0.770			
		InterPJ3	Has your supervisor treated you with respect?	0.610			
		InterPJ4	Has your supervisor refrained from inappropriate remarks or comments?	0.771			
Informational justice	Rate the following items regarding the authority figure (i.e. superior) who enacted the procedure. To what extent...	InforJ1	Has your superior been frank in his/her communications with you?	0.807	0.883	0.915	0.682
		InforJ2	Has your superior explained the procedures thoroughly?	0.855			
		InforJ3	Were your superior's explanations regarding the procedures reasonable?	0.838			
		InforJ4	Has your superior communicated details with you in a timely manner?	0.831			
		InforJ5	Has your superior seemed to adapt (his/her) communications to individuals' specific needs?	0.797			
Perceptual aspect	Org. justice	DJ		0.633	0.879	0.898	0.543
		PJ		0.752			
		InterPJ		0.706			
		InforJ		0.842			
		PMA1	In a typical day, I face several ethical dilemmas	0.819	0.847	0.887	0.568
		PMA2	I often have to choose between doing what's right and doing something that's wrong	0.767			
		PMA3	I regularly face decisions that have significant ethical implications	0.763			
PMA4	My life has been filled with one moral predicament after another	0.735					
PMA5	Many of the decisions that I make have ethical dimensions to them	0.646					
PMA6	I always face ethical dilemmas	0.713					
PMA7	I frequently encounter ethical situations	0.752					

(continued)

1st-order constructs	2nd-order constructs	Items	Items description	Loading (>0.5)	CA (>0.7)	CR (>0.7)	AVE (>0.5)
Reflective aspect		RMA8	I regularly think about the ethical implications of my decisions	0.810	0.782	0.853	0.541
		RMA9	I think about the morality of my actions almost every day	0.766			
		RMA10	I often find myself pondering about ethical issues	0.624			
		RMA11	I often reflect on the moral aspects of my decisions	0.838			
Moral attentiveness	Perceptual	RMA12	I like to think about ethics	0.607			
				0.940	0.860	0.891	0.858
				0.912			
				0.688	0.880	0.904	0.603
Employee ethical behavior		EEB1	I take responsibility for my own errors	0.617			
		EEB2	I complete time/quality/quantity reports honestly	0.738			
		EEB3	I use company services appropriately and not for personal use	0.775			
		EEB4	I am open about (and do not conceal) my errors	0.704			
		EEB5	I conduct only company business on company time	0.751			
		EEB6	I do not give gifts/favors in exchange for preferential treatment	0.767			
		EEB7	I keep confidential information confidential	0.677			
		EEB8	I take the appropriate amount of time (not longer than necessary) to do a job	0.749			
		EEB9	I report others' violation of company policies and rules	0.755			
		EEB10	I lead my subordinates (or peers) to behave ethically	0.804			
		EEB11	I am careful and do not pilfer company materials and supplies	0.769			
		EEB12	I come to work unless I am sick				

Notes: CA = Cronbach's alpha, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted

Table 1.

to build the moral attentiveness second-order construct, such that higher scores indicated greater employee moral attentiveness.

3.2.3 Employee ethical behavior. To assess this first-order variable, 12-item scale were slightly adapted from previous studies (Ferrell and Weaver, 1978; Newstrom and Ruch, 1975). In particular, employees were asked to assess their agreement regarding whether they exhibited 12 behaviors that reflect universal moral principles that lead to human growth and encourage the effective functioning of the organization. An example item was “I conduct only company business on company time.” Higher scores on this scale indicated a stronger ethical behavior of employees.

3.2.4 Control variables. Age, gender, job experience and education served as control variables for their potential relation to ethical behavior (Craft, 2013; O’Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). Age, education and job experience were measured with an ordinal scale anchored between 1 (younger, lower education, less job experience) and 5 (older, higher education, more job experience). Gender was dichotomized (0 = male, 1 = female). Finally, SDB was captured because respondents had to indicate their own ethical behavior and thus to be able to control for the potential bias it could involve. Three items from Fischer and Fick (1993) were used, with some of them negatively worded, so that items were recoded them to indicate with higher scores a stronger SDB. One of these items had a loading far above the 0.7 thresholds (“I have never been annoyed when people expressed ideas very different from my own,” item loading = 0.97). The other two remaining items had loadings far above the acceptable value of 0.55 (Falk and Miller, 1992) (“There have been occasions when I took advantage of someone,” item loading of 0.58; “I sometimes try to get even rather than forgive and forget,” item loading of 0.69). The scale showed values for Cronbach’s alpha (CA = 0.71) and composite reliability (CR = 0.74) higher than 0.7 and an average variance extracted (AVE) value of 0.51 (higher than 0.5, as recommended, Hair *et al.*, 2017), which supports the internal consistency and convergent validity of this variable (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

3.3 Common method variance

In addition to the ex-ante procedural remedies described above, a post hoc test was conducted to evaluate whether CMV could have biased the findings. Despite CMV not being able to inflate the interaction terms findings (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012), which are the central objective in this study. Still, the assessment of CMV is important to check whether this issue could have biased the findings. Harman’s (1976) single-factor test revealed no problems of this type. The purpose of this test is to run an exploratory factor analysis to know whether a single factor emerges to explain the majority of the covariance among all the items used in this study (Afthanorhan *et al.*, 2021). Because this test showed seven factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 to account for 68% of the total variance, it reveals no principal factor – the variance of the first factor accounts for only 32% of the total variance, which is less than 50%. Thus, CMV is likely not to be a concern in this study (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

4. Data analysis and results

To verify the proposed hypotheses, the Smart PLS 3.2.6 was used (Ringle *et al.*, 2015). This is a robust statistical procedure (Henseler *et al.*, 2009) that supports the inclusion of first and second-order constructs in the same analysis (Hair *et al.*, 2017), which suits the study requirements. To test the significance of path coefficients, 5,000 subsamples were used to generate bootstrap *t*-statistics with $n - 1$ degrees of freedom (where n is the number of subsamples).

4.1 Measurement model

The measurement model covers several aspects (i.e. item reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity), which were all assessed (Tables 1 and 2). In terms of individual item reliability, most items exceeded the recommended 0.707 level (Hair *et al.*, 2017; Table 2) or were above the acceptable 0.6 thresholds (Hulland, 1999; Table 1). CA and CR values for the variables ranged from 0.707 to 0.883 and 0.818 to 0.915, respectively, indicating values far above the threshold of 0.7, and therefore confirming internal consistency for all the variables in the study, both for first and second-order variables (Hair *et al.*, 2017, Table 1). For the convergent validity for the variables of this study was also confirmed given that the AVE values for all constructs exceeded the 0.5 in all the cases (AVE values ranged from 0.531 to 0.858, see Table 1) (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Finally, discriminant validity was also confirmed by Fornell–Larcker and heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) inference criteria. Based on the results, the square roots of AVE for each variable were greater than the correlation of each variable with the others, and HTMT values were significantly different from 1 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair *et al.*, 2017; see Table 2).

4.2 Hypotheses testing

To rule out alternative explanations of the findings and to reduce error (Becker, 2005). Therefore, personal attributes of individual characteristics were controlled by (age, gender, education, job experience). Therefore, none of these variables used as control variables (i.e. age, gender, education, job experience, SDB) showed a significant effect on employee ethical behavior (Figure 2). Unlike the prior studies, for example, Reiss and Mitra's (1998) *locus* of control (i.e. gender and years of job experience) were found to have some effect on whether an individual considered a certain behavior acceptable or unacceptable. Also, Holtbrügge *et al.* (2015) found that gender, age significantly influence the ethical behavior of employees. On the other hand, Fu (2014) displayed that the age of the employee had a significant negative impact on ethical behavior. This is clearly due to the cultural difference, the cultural characteristics of this society (Malaysia) (high power distance, short-term orientation, high collectivism) (Hofstede Center, 1967-2010) might affect employees' reactions to the context (Treviño *et al.*, 2006; Fu *et al.*, 2007). Regarding SDB, it showed a non-significant link to employee ethical behavior, either ($\beta = 0.06$ ns, Figure 2), thus indicating that this bias is unlikely to have affected the findings.

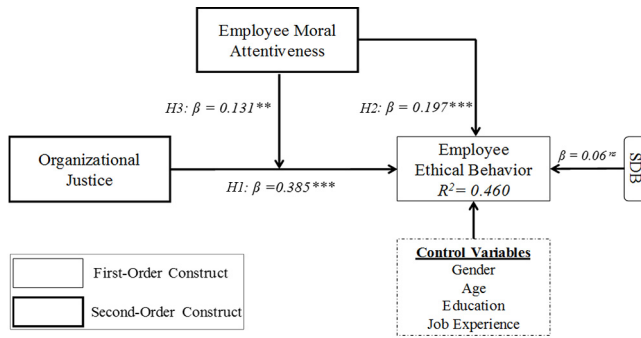
Regarding hypotheses testing, Tables 3 and 4 and Figures 2 and 3 present the findings related to the hypotheses. According to the partial least squares analysis, no multicollinearity concerns were found, as variance inflation factor values ranged from 1.073 to 1.471, far lower than the 5.0 cut-off (Hair *et al.*, 2017). In support of *H1*, the findings revealed that organizational justice is positively related to employee ethical behavior ($\beta = 0.385$, $p < 0.001$, Table 3, Figure 2). In testing *H2*, findings also allowed that to accept this hypothesis, as moral attentiveness was positively related to employee ethical behavior, as had predicted in line with the previous literature ($\beta = 0.197$, $p < 0.001$, Table 3, Figure 2).

Finally, to test the moderation prediction in *H3*, the standardized scores of the variables, to minimize multicollinearity (Low and Mohr, 2001). Organizational justice and employee moral attentiveness were entered in Step 1, then their interaction term in Step 2. According to the results in Table 3, there is a significant “organizational justice \times moral attentiveness” interaction effect ($\beta = 0.131$, $p < 0.01$, Table 3, Figure 2), in line with the predictions. Nevertheless, to interpret this interaction, Dawson's (2014) suggestions was followed and plotted high versus low employee moral attentiveness regression lines (+1 and -1 standard deviation from the mean). This step indicates that the positive relationship between

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics,
correlation matrix
and discriminant
validity (square root
of the AVE in bold
and HTMT in italics)

Constructs	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Organizational justice	3.930	0.410	0.740	0.783 [0.733;0.839]	0.736 [0.682;0.787]	0.175 [0.156;0.239]	0.152 [0.136;0.223]	0.139 [0.110;0.227]	0.078 [0.074;0.128]	0.175 [0.155;0.217]
2. Employee moral attentiveness	4.090	0.420	0.698	0.926	0.753 [0.698;0.807]	0.127 [0.103;0.203]	0.119 [0.095;0.218]	0.169 [0.140;0.260]	0.070 [0.036;0.139]	0.100 [0.064;0.177]
3. Employee ethical behavior	4.090	0.510	0.659	0.668	0.776	0.180 [0.132;0.247]	0.179 [0.121;0.273]	0.167 [0.125;0.252]	0.104 [0.096;0.139]	0.075 [0.062;0.125]
4. Social desirability bias	2.820	0.767	0.074	0.054	0.074	0.714	0.087 [0.063;0.132]	0.111 [0.005;0.153]	0.118 [0.073;0.188]	0.106 [0.062;0.166]
5. Gender	n.a	n.a	0.070	0.110	0.168	0.047	n.a	0.018 [0.005;0.134]	0.015 [0.002;0.103]	0.050 [0.005;0.119]
6. Age	n.a	n.a	-0.100	-0.070	-0.153	0.113	-0.020	n.a	0.268 [0.206;0.331]	0.660 [0.623;0.698]
7. Education	n.a	n.a	-0.110	-0.080	-0.100	0.064	0.020	0.186	n.a	0.166 [0.110;0.225]
8. Job experience	n.a	n.a	-0.010	-0.100	-0.050	0.059	-0.010	0.728	0.109	n.a

Notes: SD = standard deviation. n.a. = not applicable. Bold values on the diagonal in the correlation matrix are square roots of AVE (i.e. variance shared between the constructs and their respective measures). Off-diagonal elements below the diagonal are correlations among the constructs, where values between 0.12 and 0.15 are significant at $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed test) and values above 0.15 are significant at $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed test). Off-diagonal elements above the diagonal are the heterotrait-monotrait ratios of correlations (HTMT) and their respective 95% confidence intervals



Notes: SDB = social desirability bias; *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$; ns = not significant. Demographic variables had no significant effects on employee ethical behavior: gender ($\beta = 0.03$, ns), age, ($\beta = -0.08$, ns), education ($\beta = 0.04$, ns) and job experience ($\beta = -0.04$, ns)

Figure 2. Research model: hypotheses testing

Hypothesis testing direct and interaction effects	Relationship	Bias and corrected bootstrap 95% confidence interval				
		SB	SD	[Lower level; Upper level]		Decision
H1	OJ→EEB	0.385***	0.061	0.275	0.475	Supported
H2	MA→EEB	0.197***	0.067	0.075	0.293	Supported
H3	OJ × MA→EEB	0.131**	0.052	0.041	0.203	Supported

Notes: OJ = organizational justice, EEB = employee ethical behavior; MA = moral attentiveness. SD, standard deviation, *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 3. Research model: direct and interaction effects

Independent-dependent variables	Variance explained			Size of the moderation effect (f^2)
	Direct model	Moderated model	Δ Variance explained	
With OJ and MA as independent variables →EEB	0.405			
With the interaction "OJ X MA" added → EEB		0.460	0.055	0.10 (small-moderate)

Notes: OJ = organizational justice, EEB = employee ethical behavior; MA = moral attentiveness. $f^2 = (R^2 \text{ included} - R^2 \text{ excluded}) / (1 - R^2 \text{ included})$; effect sizes of $f^2 \geq 0.02$, ≥ 0.15 , and ≥ 0.35 are small, moderate and large, respectively (Cohen, 1988)

Table 4. Direct model versus moderation model: change in variance explained and moderation effect sizes

organizational justice and employee ethical behavior is stronger (slope is more pronounced) when employee moral attentiveness is high rather than low (Figure 3). In clear support of H3, the relationship between organizational justice and employee ethical behavior is intensified at higher levels of employee moral attentiveness, so moral attentiveness has a strengthening "small-to-moderate" effect in the positive relationship between organizational justice and employee ethical behavior ($f^2 = 0.10$, Cohen, 1988, Table 4). While according to

the plot graphed in Figure 3, organizational justice perceptions have a positive impact on employee ethical behavior (H1, Table 3, Figure 2) even among low morally attentive employees (Figure 3), moral attentiveness improves employee ethical behavior itself (H2, Table 3, Figure 2) and could help to make organizational justice to sway employees to behave up to the highest moral excellence levels possible, as predicted in H3 (Figure 3).

In terms of explanatory power, the model explains a ($R^2 = 46\%$) of the total variance of employee ethical behavior (Figure 2), which according to Hair *et al.* (2017), implies a moderate effect of this model on this variable. The Stone–Geisser blindfolding sample reuse technique also reveals a Q-square value greater than 0, so the model effectively predicts employee ethical behavior ($Q^2 = 0.261$) (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Finally, in terms of overall goodness-of-fit, the standardized root means square residual (SRMR) index offers a value of 0.041, which is far below the 0.08 cut-off (Henseler, 2017). Also, the SRMR's 95% bootstrap quantile is 0.054, and thus is higher than the SRMR value, which indicates that the model has a good fit (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Finally, the discrepancy indexes unweighted least squares discrepancy (dULS) and geodesic discrepancy (dG) are also under the bootstrap-based 95% percentile (dULS = 1.421 < HI 95 of dULS = 2.521; dG = 0.562 < HI 95 of dG = 0.989) (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Overall, the discrepancy between the empirical and the model-implied correlation matrix is non-significant, which suggests no reasons to reject the model, or in other words, that the model tested is likely to be true (Henseler, 2017).

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1 General discussion

This study aimed to examine the direct effect of organizational justice and moral attentiveness toward employee ethical behavior. Significantly, we also examined the moderating role of moral attentiveness on the relationships among organizational justice and the ethical behavior of employees. Therefore, the findings of this study indicated that organizational justice and moral attentiveness were significantly related to employee ethical behavior. So, both variables, as discovered, have a beneficial impact on employee ethical behavior. Importantly, the relationship between organizational justice and employee ethical behavior is stronger when the employee embraces high moral attentiveness than low. Thus, indicating that employees' level of moral attentiveness can augment the favorable impact of organizational justice on employee ethical behavior. Therefore, this study brings to important conclusions: First, by contributing to make employees perceive that justice is lived up in all the internal aspects and intricacies of the organization (e.g. outcomes,

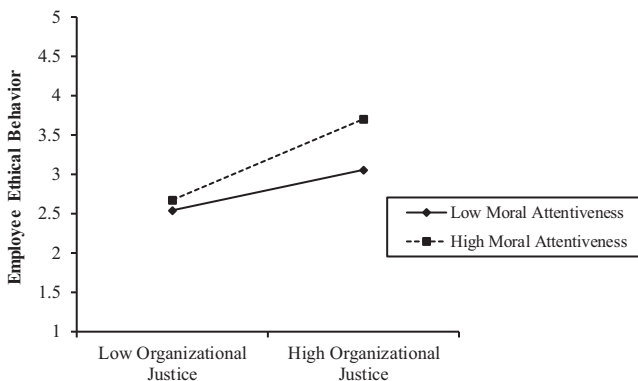


Figure 3.
The “Organizational Justice × Moral Attentiveness” interaction on ethical behavior

procedures, interpersonal treatment, information), the organization can enhance the levels of ethical behavior in the workplace. Second, in obtaining high levels of ethical behavior among employees, general managers should be conscious that moral attentiveness of employees is critical: not only does this quasi-personality trait drives employees to a higher level of ethical behavior but also would make more effective any effort made by general managers directed to make employees perceive that justice is actually lived in their organization.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to ethical behavior literature in various ways. First, while organizational justice has been largely studied for its important role in influencing a large variety of outcomes (Colquitt and Greenberg, 2003), its impact on employee ethical behavior has been less studied (McCain *et al.*, 2010; Treviño *et al.*, 2014). Also, when studying this relationship, researchers have focused principally on investigating the distinct, unique role of each dimension of organizational justice on the ethical behavior of employees, especially the role of distributive, procedural or interpersonal justice. Thus, the current study is one of the few that investigates and shows how organizational justice, as a whole construct integrated by its different dimensions (i.e. distributive, procedural, interpersonal and informational), is able to enhance the ethical behavior of employees.

Second, moral attentiveness is a relatively new concept in the ethics literature (van Gils *et al.*, 2015), so the findings advance the literature by showing its direct and moderating role to account for the variance of employee ethical behavior. Moral attentiveness is linked to screening and considering morality in the day-to-day experiences and is rooted in social cognitive theory grounds (Bandura, 1986) that predict that “where” individuals pay attention in their day-to-day activities has an important impact on their behavioral decisions (Fiske, 1993; Bandura, 1986); however, empirical research that notes a positive relationship of this variable to ethical behavior is still in its infancy. Thus, while it has been positively linked to aspects intimately associated with ethical decision making (i.e. moral imagination, moral awareness, Sturm, 2018), some other studies have failed to find any relationship of this variable to ethical behavior (van Gils *et al.*, 2015). This study adds to this realm of research by showing that moral attentiveness can underlie enhanced ethical behavior among employees.

Besides the demonstration of this direct effect of moral attentiveness on employee ethical behavior, one of the most important contributions of this study is the identification of moral attentiveness as a boundary condition for the organizational justice-ethical behavior relationship. While more consideration in empirical research to the cognitive processes that precede moral behavior has been called for (Zhu *et al.*, 2016), only a few studies have echoed this call (Sturm, 2018; van Gils *et al.*, 2015), and this is one of them, thus adding to the identification of moral attentiveness as a concept that is vital in explaining the transition of external moral stimuli into moral behavior (Hannah *et al.*, 2011; Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe, 2008). In addition, this study adds to the current literature by adding evidence concerning the individual-situation interactionist perspective that suggests that ethical behavior can be better explained by the interplay between organizational and individual variables (O’Keefe *et al.*, 2019; Treviño, 1986; Treviño *et al.*, 2006). Such a finding faithfully reflects the foundational theoretical perspective (i.e. social cognitive theory) in which the concept of moral attentiveness is rooted upon (Bandura, 1986; Fiske, 1993) by showing that an individual’s behavior is principally a function of the individual and its personality (e.g. moral attentiveness) and the external stimuli (e.g. organizational justice).

Overall, this study brings organizational justice, moral attentiveness and employee ethical behavior together for the first time in the literature. Moreover, the current study focuses on a non-Western context like Malaysia, which is of high relevance, given that the current organizational justice literature over-focuses on Western contexts. This is also important because Malaysia is a multi-racial society with Malay, Chinese, Indian and other ethnicities, which expresses important differences in terms of beliefs, religion, ideology and identity (Weintraub, 2011), so this study offers important evidence of the generalizability in other cultures of the positive influence of organizational justice perceptions on employee ethical behavior and the positive impact of moral attentiveness on employee ethical behavior – both in direct terms and by strengthening the expected positive impact of organizational justice on employee ethical behavior. Finally, by confirming the reliability and validity of Reynolds' (2008) moral attentiveness scale in Malaysia, this study helps to the robustness of the theory that underlies the moral attentiveness phenomenon and its two critical dimensions (i.e. perceptual, reflective), as this concept, to date, has been mostly studied on Western-cultural contexts (USA, Wurthmann, 2013; Reynolds, 2008; Whitaker and Godwin, 2013; The Netherlands, van Gils *et al.*, 2015; UK, Dawson, 2018). Only Dong and Ni (2016) have used this concept in non-Western geography, and in their study, one item of the original Reynolds' (2008) scale had to be dropped. This study is one of fewer that applies this scale in a non-Western, multicultural context (i.e. Malaysia), and confirms scale dimensionality (perceptual and reflective dimensions) for all the original Reynold's (2008) 12 items (Table 1).

5.3 Practical implications

Findings of this study send a clear signal to managers that “failing to ensure that their employees perceive organizational justice” may undermine every effort made by them to improve their organizations' ethical quality. Considering that organizational justice has emerged as a key activator of employee ethical conduct, managers need to be aware that any efforts aimed at enhancing the sense of justice in the results obtained, procedures followed, supervisor-employee interactions developed and knowledge obtained are essential to enhancing their organizational moral conduct. In this sense, general managers could devote their efforts to designing good internal communication systems and open different communication channels to allow organizational members to become rapidly informed about decisions made at any level of the organization and especially about things that are most relevant to their interests. In addition, General managers should not disregard the value of training programs aimed at informing each supervisor in the organization about the significance of and how to provide appropriate rationales for their actions to their members of the team (Al Halbusi and Tehseen, 2018). Also, these training programs could involve strategies on how to treat their team members with dignity and respect. Managing how orders are given or how to tell employees they underperformed or made an error in doing their job tasks could improve the level of organizational justice (interpersonal justice) that employees perceive.

Importantly, the findings emphasize the role of moral attentiveness in improving the ethical behavior of employees both directly and by strengthening the effectiveness of organizational justice to impact such a behavior positively. So, given the advantages of moral attentiveness in terms of improving employee ethical conduct, businesses should make every effort to hire and choose people who meet this requirement because it is not easy to spot this personality trait. Human Resource Managers may assess candidates' moral attentiveness using a range of methods such as group debate, an in-basket exercise, organized interviews and business games that concentrate on specific ethical

concerns. Furthermore, given that this trait can be trained, supervisors may commit energy and resources to implement training programs oriented to teach behavioral patterns on how to solve various ethical issues, so employees' attentiveness levels become increased to any moral cue that reminds them of these issues. Finally, personal or professional experiences resulting from interactions with role models could result in enhanced levels of moral attentiveness (Reynolds, 2008). As such, managers should do their utmost to become role models of ethical behavior as the virtuousness showed to others could make employees gather knowledge on how to perform successfully in moral terms and thus become motivated enough to flourish in moral terms, which should increase their attentiveness to the opportunities that exist in the environment to fulfill such a commendable goal (Al Halbusi and Amir Hammad Hamid, 2018; Dawson, 2018; Salehi *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b).

5.4 Limitations and future research directions

This study is not without limitations. The first limitation refers to our cross-sectional data design, which makes it difficult to provide final conclusions about causality. Thus, important elements were recommended for future researchers interested in advancing our research model that finds creative formulas to designing experimental or longitudinal designs that help reinforce the causality findings of this study.

The second limitation of this study lies in the data. In this study, our data came from a single source, and CMV could have affected our findings. However, because our principal research question had to do with the "moral attentiveness \times organizational justice" interaction, CMV is less than likely to affect our findings (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). Also, the recommendations of Podsakoff *et al.*'s (2012) were faithfully followed to avoid this bias by principally conducting two survey waves in the data collection phase. Self-reported data even may be more advantageous for measuring ethical behavior than other-rated measures because employees are primarily of their own behaviors. Nonetheless, further studies aware could help extend our findings by collecting judgments from other sources concerning variables such as organizational justice.

Finally, this research did not take other factors into account in explaining ethical behavior. The ethical issue is a highly complex phenomenon that is affected by various variables at the individual and organizational level (Treviño *et al.*, 2006; Craft, 2013; O'Keefe *et al.*, 2019). As such, one must be cautious about the inferences made from the present study, which, to some extent, simplifies the ethical behavior by focusing on a few variables as determinants of ethical behavior in organizations. In this sense, moral awareness was not considered in this investigation; however, this concept is closely related to moral attentiveness (Reynolds, 2008). While moral attentiveness *subconsciously* promotes automatic processing and screening of information in the immediate environment before the person faces a specific issue, moral awareness is the recognition that a situation requires an ethical framework to be solved and involves a *conscious* process of comparing alternatives against moral standards once moral cues of a specific issue have been recognized (van Gils *et al.*, 2015). Thus, moral awareness is likely to be required for an individual before this individual takes an ethical decision (Jones, 1991; Butterfield *et al.*, 2000) and could interact with moral attentiveness to enhance the ethical behavior of employees.

It would also be useful to investigate the role of moral attentiveness in ensuring that employees believe that justice exists in their workplaces. The moral tone of a business is determined by the CEO or general manager (van Gils *et al.*, 2015), with significant trickle-down ethics effects (Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2012; O'Keefe *et al.*, 2019), including the shaping

of the organizational justice perceptions of employees (Ko *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, the effect of these managers' good character on employees' judgments of organizational justice may be dependent on their level of moral awareness. It would be interesting to investigate the impact of moral attentiveness in situations where CEOs develop behaviors that benefit the organization and its members while also displaying unethical beliefs toward other stakeholders. Since morally attentive employees prefer moral behavior and can recall ethical prototypes for dealing with specific moral-content situations (Sturm, 2018), the presence of unethical leaders in the upper echelons whose behavior is inconsistent with their moral view (van Gils *et al.*, 2015) may cause these employees to be highly skeptical about whether justice is actually lived in the functioning of their organization. Overall, future researchers interested in furthering the findings of this study will have a plethora of options.

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Further reading

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