

Inequality at Work and Employees' Perceptions of Organisational Fairness

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Abstract

The need to promote fairness at work, as a way of both enhancing employee well-being and raising productivity, has become increasingly central to political discourse. There has been little research, however, on perceptions of fairness across the diverse spectrum of employees in the workforce—the extent to which they regard their organisations as fair and the work experiences that most strongly inform their judgements about fairness. The paper draws on a representative national sample of British employees to examine the distribution and potential determinants of their views about the overall fairness of their organisations and how these differ by occupational class and sex. As well as pointing to the central importance of employee voice and the quality of supervisory treatment, it shows that the level of work intensity and job security are strongly associated with evaluations of fairness. In contrast, the effects of pay policies are relatively modest.

Introduction

The notion of fairness is increasingly cited as a key objective that the UK government, devolved administrations, combined local authorities and local councils aim to promote. The British Government's (1998) White Paper *Fairness at Work*, depicted it as the key to replacing conflict with partnership in industry and to stimulating innovation. Two decades later, the UK government's response to the Taylor Review report *Good Work* strongly endorsed the need to enhance fairness at work (HM Government, 2018). There also have been initiatives by both the Scottish and Welsh governments to promote Fair Work. In the European Union, creating fair working conditions also has come to be a central tenet of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The definition of fair work adopted by most such policy initiatives is explicitly concerned with fairness in objective work conditions (BEIS, 2018; Sissons, 2019) – in particular whether or not workers are accorded adequate rights and conditions with respect to pay, voice, security and healthy work conditions. Adequacy is defined in terms of legal or conventional criteria of the quality of work conditions considered important for employee well-being. There is however another significant aspect of fairness – namely whether conditions of work are *perceived* by employees as fair. An important issue is whether the objective conditions of fairness informing policy objectives correspond to workers' own views about what constitute fair practice. How far are the disadvantages experienced by employees in objective work conditions reflected in different views about the fairness of their organisations? Do these responses differ between different types of employee? These questions have been difficult to address hitherto due a lack of good evidence about how fair employees consider their organisations to be and the factors that affect their judgements .

The article draws on new evidence on workers' perceptions of fairness from the British Skills and Employment Survey 2017. It examines three principal issues: whether specific disadvantages in work are associated with differences in perceived organisational fairness among British employees overall; whether there are differences between occupational classes in their views about the fairness of their organisations and the factors that affect these; and, finally, whether there are gender differences in fairness perceptions and their determinants.

Theoretical Issues and Research Questions

Research on job quality has demonstrated the high degree of persistence of inequalities at work both at European level (Green et al. 2013) and more specifically for the UK (Gallie, 2015). It has also highlighted disadvantages in work conditions between specific types of worker that are likely to

frame perceptions of fairness. It has focused particularly on the disadvantages experienced by those in less skilled class positions and by female workers. Although there has been increasing recognition of other forms of labour market disadvantage (for instance of ethnic minority workers), there is still a lack good representative data on their workplace experience.

One principal focus has been on inequalities in participation in decision-making, which are seen as fundamental to people's capacity for self-realization and self-development at work. The issue relates both to workers' ability to take decisions with respect to the immediate work task and the influence they can have over wider organisational decisions that may affect them. The evidence points consistently to major differences between occupational classes in the ability to take decisions with respect to the job task, although there has been considerable debate about long-term trends - with some emphasizing a progressive growth of disadvantage (Friedmann, 1945; Braverman, 1973) and others some restoration of employee initiative as a result of new forms of technology and a greater concern for product or service quality (Lawler, 1992; Appelbaum et al. 2000). While views vary about the extent to which task discretion has been eroded, there is relative consensus that there remain persistently sharp differentials between occupational classes in influence over wider organisational decisions. While the rise of human resource management policies may have led to more active informational policies and to greater employee involvement in quality circles and suggestion schemes (Boxall and Purcell, 2010), the influence they provide over significant decisions affecting work processes appears very limited (Gallie, 2015).

A second dimension of inequality in work highlighted by the literature is the nature of pay policies. The growth of human resource management led to a sharp rise in use of individual performance payment systems in the 1990s (McGovern et al. 2007; Williams et al. 2019), which reinforce inequalities between occupational classes. Performance-related pay readily raises issues about fairness, given that supervisory judgments on relative performance may be difficult justify. The benefits of performance-related pay for overall pay levels, however, also differ substantially

between occupational classes: while providing a bonus on top of base earnings for managers and professionals, it partially substitutes for base earnings in less skilled occupational classes, thereby increasing risks of pay loss (Williams et al. 2019).

Inequalities of pay are also central to sex inequalities in employment. Gender pay differentials remain remarkably pervasive - women have lower earnings than men in all occupational classes (ONS, 2019). This has been variously attributed to the role of direct discrimination, traditional skill classification systems, the gender segregation of jobs, and in particular the high proportion of women in part-time work. Sex inequalities in pay are also evident in the considerably higher proportions of women with low pay (Cominetti et al. 2019), with its implication of a much higher risk of poverty (Millar and Gardiner, 2004; Mason and Salverda, 2019).

A third type of inequality underlined by research is that of health risks. In recent decades, this has focused particularly on psychosocial risks - components of working life that produce intense, recurrent and long lasting stressful experience (Marmot et al. 1999). This highlights two major stressors - work intensity and job security. The two most influential theoretical perspectives - those of Karasek and Theorell (1990) and Siegrist (Siegrist and Wahrendorf, 2016) - both underline the crucial importance of work intensity (job demands, work effort) for psychological health, although they differ with respect to its principal moderators (decision latitude and social support for the former, the level of compensatory rewards for the latter). In both cases, given their limited access to the factors that moderate work intensity, those in the less skilled occupational classes are likely to suffer particularly severely from work intensity.

The importance of job insecurity as a stressor is confirmed by evidence that its effects on mental health are comparable to those of unemployment itself (Sverke, et al. 2006; Probst 2009). Such studies are primarily concerned with job security in terms of fear of job loss. There is another aspect, however, of job insecurity - job status insecurity or insecurities about the ability to retain valued features of the job, for instance with respect to the use of skills, pay and job interest (Hellgren et al.

1999; Gallie et al. 2017). There is evidence that job status insecurity is even more strongly related to occupational class position than insecurity about job loss, with negative effects particularly marked among those in lower skilled and intermediate class positions (Gallie et al, 2017). Most recently, research has highlighted unpredictable work hours as another aspect of insecurity that may be significant for well-being (Felstead et al. 2020).

The evidence on inequalities at work is then very extensive. As Runciman (1966) pointed out, however, a crucial question is the relation between inequalities and the awareness and resentment of them. There is indirect support from studies of worker well-being that workers are aware of, and affected by, disadvantaged work conditions. Cross-sectional evidence shows that the level of participation in decisions affects well-being (Boxall and Macky, 2014). There is also longitudinal evidence that low influence over decisions and job insecurity are associated with lower job satisfaction (Gallie et al. 2017). A wide range of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies confirm the negative effects of work intensity and fear of job loss on the psychological well-being of employees (Green et al. 2016; OECD 2017). While there is less research on job status insecurity, there is longitudinal evidence that it affects exhaustion and sickness absence (Kinnunen et al. 2009) .

Further confirmation of the negative psychological effects of disadvantages with respect to decision-making and pay is to be found in research on 'Organisational Justice'. This is also distinctive in highlighting the strong effects of 'interactional' factors – in particular treatment by supervisors. Both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies confirm the effects of procedural, distributive and interactional disadvantage in work conditions on well-being, commitment and quit rates (Colquitt and Rodell, 2015; Eib et al 2018; Hämmig, 2017; Leineweber et al 2016; Dornstein, 1989; Törnblom and Kazemi, 2015).

There are also , however, cautionary arguments that suggest that objective disadvantage may not necessarily lead to dissatisfaction and resentment. The first concerns the visibility of inequalities – it may be difficult for people to know how their situation compares to others (Runciman, 1966).

Arguably, with respect to sex differences, high levels of female job segregation may reduce knowledge of differentials and hence a sense of unfairness. The relationship between disadvantage and perceived fairness also may be affected by values and expectations. Goldthorpe et al (1969) argue that manual workers are increasingly adopting an instrumental approach to work that makes them less concerned about objective deprivations in working conditions as long as jobs provide a satisfactory level of income. Similarly, Hakim (1996) argues that women's investment in their family roles may reduce the value centrality of paid work and lead to low levels of dissatisfaction with unequal employment conditions, an argument for which Zou (2015) finds evidence in the low dissatisfaction of female part-time workers, despite their poorer employment conditions.

Even if people are aware of disadvantage and experience its negative effects on well-being, they may not regard it as unfair, but internalize blame or view it as inevitable. Judgements of fairness require that people compare their disadvantage with others using a normative standard. There is little direct evidence on whether perceived disadvantage affects perceived organisational fairness. There has been research into views about fairness with respect to specific employment rights or forms of discrimination (Fevre et al. 2009), but not into how the different types of disadvantage highlighted by theories of work inequality affect perceptions of organizational fairness among British employees. Some studies of organisational justice by psychologists have shown that influence in decision-making procedures, pay and treatment by supervisors have significant negative effects on overall perceptions of fairness at work (Ambrose and Schminke 2009, Ambrose et al 2015; Colquitt and Rodell 2015). These are typically based, however, on laboratory experiments or small-scale samples of workers in specific occupations or firms (Ambrose et al. 2015). The broader representativeness of their findings remains unknown.

Data, Indicators and Measure Validation

The paper draws on nationally representative data on employees from the 2017 Skills and Employment Survey (unweighted N=2802). Random probability principles were used for the sampling. Interviews were in individuals homes, with a response rate of 50%. Weights take account of the differential probability of sample selection, over-sampling of certain areas and a small response rate variation between groups (sex, age and occupation)¹. Given that the survey is cross-sectional, although we can examine the consistency of patterns of association with theoretical expectation, statements about causality cannot be made in a rigorous way. The use of the term effects should be understood in a statistical rather causal way.

The Indicator of Overall Fairness

Our measure of perceived organisational fairness was drawn from recent psychological literature on fairness (Ambrose and Schminke 2009, Ambrose et al 2015; Colquitt and Rodell 2015). A limitation of much previous psychological literature on fairness at work is that typically it did not measure perceptions of fairness directly, but took reports of specific organisational practices as proxies of fairness evaluations. A measure of overall organisational fairness has the advantage of providing direct evidence on perceptions of fairness, making it possible to examine the relative importance of different aspects of potential disadvantage at work and variations in their importance between types of employee.

The measure combines three items from Ambrose and Shminke's (2009) Perceived Overall Justice (POJ) scale. Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed (using a five-point scale) with the following three statements:

- Overall I am treated fairly by my organisation

¹ For full details see the Technical Report in the UK Data Archive:
http://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/8581/mrdoc/pdf/8581_ses_technical_report_2017_draft_2.pdf

- For the most part, this organisation treats its employees fairly
- Most of the people who work in your organisation would say that they are often treated unfairly

The indicators capture different perspectives on overall fairness: the individuals personal experience of treatment by the organisation, their perception of the treatment of employees in general and their perception of beliefs about fairness among others in the organisation. The items are highly correlated (with a Cronbachs alpha of .79), and constitute a single dimension in a principal components analysis, allowing the construction of a fairness index from the average of the three items (reversing the scores for the third item).

For descriptive purposes, the strength of fairness perceptions is presented in two ways: through the mean scores and through the percentages with scores representing strong agreement that their organisation is fair. For the second measure, index scores for overall fairness were rounded to the nearest integer and a score of five on the index was taken to represent strongly agree, consistent with the scoring for the individual component items.

Indicators of Work Context Characteristics

The survey provides a number of indicators of the work context characteristics that may affect perceptions of fairness:

Participation in Decision-Making: There are two aspects of participation: influence over organisational decisions with respect to work processes (organisational participation) and influence over decisions about the immediate job task (task discretion). A measure of organisational participation was constructed from two questions. Respondents were first asked 'Suppose there was going to be some decision made at your place of work that changed the way you do your job. Do you think that you personally would have any say in the decision about the change or not?' Those reporting that they would have a say were then asked how much say or chance to influence the decision they personally would have, with possible responses of none, it depends, a little, quite a lot, and a great deal (giving a scale ranging from 0 to 4).

The measure of task discretion was derived from four items asking respondents how much influence they personally had on how hard they worked, deciding what tasks they did, how to do the task and the quality standards to which they worked, each with four-point response scales from a great deal to none at all. The scale of task discretion is the average of the four items (alpha .77).

Relations with Supervisors: The principal focus in the literature has been on the personal respect, recognition and care that supervisors show in their treatment of employees. The survey provides a measure of respect with an item: 'To what extent do you agree or disagree that your immediate boss respects you as a person?', with a four-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Supervisory care and recognition are measured with three items. Respondents were asked how helpful their supervisor or manager was in 'enabling you to learn how to do your job better', 'supporting you when you are under pressure' and 'recognising the extent of your abilities'? Responses ranged from 'a great deal of help' to 'no help at all'.

Pay Policies: Studies of distributive justice point to three criteria of the fairness of pay – whether it reflects contribution in terms of effort, equality with those of similar status and adequacy with respect to need. We take as an indicator of whether pay relates to contribution a question about whether the person receives any incentive payment, bonus or commission that is linked directly to performance. Pay equality with those of similar status is measured by taking the proportional difference between the individual's gross hourly pay and the sample average for those in the same first-digit occupation, controlling for sex, age and region. An indicator of the likelihood that pay is related to need (in the sense of primary or basic need) is whether it is above the level of the minimum wage at the time of the survey. While the income from others may affect household income, the low paid are much more likely to experience poverty (Millar and Gardiner, 2004).

Psychosocial Stressors. The two principal stressors highlighted in the literature are work intensity and job insecurity. An indicator of work intensity takes the average score over five questions, asking how much people agreed that 'My work requires that I work very hard', 'I work under a great deal

of tension' and 'I often have to work extra time, over and above the formal hours of my job, to get through the work or to help out'. Two further items capture the extent to which employees had to work to tight deadlines or at very high speed.

The indicators of job security distinguish insecurity relating to the risk of job loss and insecurity about existing status in the organisation. With respect to job loss people were asked whether there is any chance at all of their losing their job and becoming unemployed in the next 12 months, with a follow-up for those reporting a risk about the likelihood of that happening. Job status insecurity is measured by taking the average of six questions about how anxious people were about aspects of their work situation. These included two items about treatment: anxiety about being unfairly treated through discrimination and being subject to victimisation by management. The other four items focused on anxiety about future changes to the job that would give less say over how it is done, make it more difficult to use the persons skills and abilities, reduce their pay, and lead to the employee being transferred to a less interesting job in the organisation. A separate item captured work hour insecurity, asking about anxiety with respect to unexpected changes to my hours of work.

The Distribution of Perceptions of Overall Fairness

Taking the employed workforce as a whole, the overall mean in the last row of Table 1 show that employees were more likely to consider their organisations fair than unfair. This primarily reflects, however, a moderate level of agreement: only 25% of employees were in strong agreement that their organisations were fair. Research has highlighted marked differences in work and employment conditions by class and sex. How far are these reflected in differences in perceptions of organisational fairness?

Occupational class position is defined in terms of the major groups of the Standard Occupational Classification, a classification based on skill levels. In general, differentials in work and employment

conditions were reflected in perceptions of fairness (Table 1). Overall managers were the most likely to consider their organisation fair, while employees in sales, operative or elementary occupations were the least likely. The pattern was not however linear. Administrative and secretarial employees were more positive in their views than either professionals or associate professionals. Skilled manual workers were more positive than associate professionals, while those in caring and leisure occupations had mean scores similar to associate professionals and higher proportions strongly agreeing.

Tests of significance show that, while overall all other occupational groups had lower fairness scores than managers, this was not the case for men in professional, administrative and caring occupations, or for women in administrative and skilled manual work. The main class divide with respect to fairness was then primarily between those in high and intermediate skilled occupations on the one hand and those in relatively low skilled occupations on the other.

Table 1 here

In contrast, there was no evidence that womens' disadvantages in work and employment conditions led overall to a more negative view about the fairness of their organisations. Women had almost identical mean scores to those of men, while they were more likely than men to strongly agree that their organisations are fair (Table 1). There are interesting anomalies, however, with respect to specific occupational classes. In particular, it is notable that women in professional occupations were considerably less likely than their male equivalents to consider their organisations fair, whether taking the mean scores or the proportions strongly agreeing. In contrast, women were more strongly positive than men about the fairness of their organisations in operative occupations.

Sources of Variation in Perceptions of Overall Fairness

Which aspects of work context were most strongly related to perceptions of fairness and were they similar across different categories of employee? This is examined through linear regression analysis.

The beta (or standardised) coefficients are presented to facilitate comparison of the relative strength of effects. The analyses included controls for age, sex (where appropriate), industry, ownership sector and firm size.

All Employees

Taking first the pattern for all employees (Table 2), there were strong associations of several factors with overall fairness perceptions. With respect to participation in decision making, influence over wider organisational decisions was particularly important. Control over the immediate job task (task discretion) was also significant, although the coefficient was lower. Supervisory support and respect were highly significant, supporting the predictions of interactional theories of fairness. The key stressors - work intensity and insecurity - were both associated with lower perceived fairness, although it is notable that the strongest insecurity effect was job status rather than job loss insecurity. The evidence was less supportive for factors relating to pay. Performance-related pay and low pay were negatively related to fairness, but the coefficients and significance levels were low. Relative pay compared to similar employees made no significant difference.

Table 2 here

The relative importance of different sets of work characteristics is shown in Figure 1, which gives the proportion of variance accounted for by each. The largest effect was that of the quality of supervisory relations, followed by the prevalence of psychosocial stressors and participative

decision-making. The least important were pay policies which accounted for only a very small part of the variance. The pattern was consistent in tests in which the three fairness indicators were examined separately.

Figure 1 here

Differences in Fairness Perceptions between Occupational Classes

The differences in work context factors, taken together, account for a high proportion of the differences in perceptions of organisational fairness (Figure 2). In all occupational classes, they reduced the initial negative occupational class coefficients for fairness (compared to managers) by more than half, and in the case of employees in sales, caring and leisure, and skilled trades by more than two-thirds. They accounted for the entire difference for elementary and for administrative-secretarial employees.

Figure 2 here

To provide more robust sample numbers, occupational classes were aggregated into three broad class groups –professional and managerial occupations, intermediary occupations (associate professionals, administrative and secretarial employees and personal service workers) and lower skilled occupations (sales, operatives and elementary). As the mean scores show in the first three columns of Table 3, less skilled occupations were disadvantaged with respect to all aspects of work and employment conditions with the exception of work intensity. This was most notable for decision-making influence over work organisation.

The last three columns of Table 3 show the importance of different factors for fairness in separate analyses for each occupational class group. There are several cross-class commonalities: Influence over work organisation was important for employees in each class group, as was supervisory support and the respect, and the pressure of psychosocial stressors.

Table 3 here

There were, however, also class group differences. Interaction tests showed that job status insecurity and working hour insecurity were particularly strongly associated with fairness perceptions among managers and professionals. In contrast fairness perceptions in the intermediate classes were more strongly affected than in other classes by low pay (<0.10 level of significance). Those in lower skilled occupations were distinctive in the stronger effects of supervisory respect and the level of work intensity.

The importance of work context factors for differences in fairness perceptions reflects both the strength of their effects and their prevalence in each class group. Their overall relative contribution was examined by comparing the change in the coefficient for the difference between the perceptions of fairness of the low skilled compared to managers and professionals when different sets of work context factors were entered separately into a regression.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the introduction of pay policies left the lower skilled class coefficient virtually unchanged. Although psychosocial stressors and supervisory support had a moderate effect, there was still a significant negative coefficient for the low skilled when they had been taken into account. The factor that makes a very substantial difference is that of decision-making influence. The coefficient for the low skilled falls to close to zero and is no longer significant when influence over work organisation and task discretion are taken into account. Since the effects of these factors were broadly similar in different classes, their importance in accounting for class differences can be

attributed primarily to the fact that the level of influence over decisions was considerably lower in lower skilled jobs.

Figure 3 about here

Differences in Fairness Perceptions between Male and Female Employees

As was seen earlier, there was little difference in the level of fairness perceptions of male and female employees. Moreover, there were considerable similarities in the factors related to fairness (Table 4, columns 1 & 2). Influence over organisational decisions and the support and respect received from supervisors were significant for both sexes, as were work intensity, employment insecurity, job status insecurity and (at a low level of significance) work hours security. The marginal sex difference with respect to low pay in the separate regressions was not confirmed as significant in an interaction test based on the overall sample. Interaction tests showed only a significantly stronger effect for women of supervisory respect and work intensity (Table 4, column 3).

Table 4 here

Comparing the mean level of work context factors within class groups, male managers and professionals had higher participation in decision-making (+.52), while women were more likely to have performance pay (+.20) and to experience the stressors of work intensity, job status loss and hour insecurity (+.18, .14 and .26). In intermediate classes, there was little sex difference in participation, but women were more likely to have performance pay (+.14) and experience hours insecurity (+.18). In lower skilled occupations, women had higher supervisory support (+.21), but were more likely to have low pay (+.18) and greater fear of job loss (+.15).

There were no significant sex differences, however, in the strength of the associations between the different work context factors and fairness in either the intermediate or lower skilled class groups. In

contrast, there were three differences in the case of managerial and professional employees: the fairness judgements of female managers and professionals were more strongly affected positively by task discretion and supervisory respect and negatively by the level of work intensity (Table 4, column 4).

As was seen in Table 1, female professionals were exceptional in having more negative judgements about fairness than men. A series of regression analyses introducing controls for different sets of work context factors to assess their relative importance showed that the psycho-social stressors were the major factors that accounted for the gender difference, eliminating the statistical significance of the gender difference. There were two aspects of this. The first was work intensity – which was both experienced as higher by female than male professionals (mean score +.40) and had a stronger effect on fairness perceptions. The second was job status insecurity, which was also more prevalent for female professionals, although having a similar importance for fairness evaluations as was the case for men².

Arguably the expected effect of pay inequality on women's sense of fairness was limited by restricted knowledge of the differentials due to gender segregation. If so pay factors could be expected to have a weaker effect on perceptions of fairness among those in highly segregated settings. This was tested using a question asking to what extent in their workplace the person's type of job was done 'mainly by women' or 'almost exclusively by women'. An interaction analysis (Table 4, column 5) showed that, for women in segregated settings, although the quality of relations with supervisors was more important for fairness than for other female employees, there was no evidence that segregation led to a lower importance of pay factors.

Turning to contractual hour status, an interaction test for the differences between female full-timers and part-timers confirmed only three significant cases (Table 4): female full-timers perceptions of

² A variant analysis including satisfaction with promotion opportunities showed this had little effect on fairness perceptions.

fairness were more strongly associated positively with relative advantage in pay, and negatively with low pay (at 10% level of significance) and with job status insecurity.

Overall, then, the evidence points to a broadly similar strength of relationship between specific work context factors and perceived fairness among men and women. The more negative assessment of organisational fairness for women compared to men in managerial and professional occupations was primarily due to differences in their exposure to stressful work conditions – in particular with respect to work intensity and job status insecurity. There was evidence that the strength of factors related to fairness differed between types of female employees: the effects of both pay and job status insecurity were stronger for full-time than for part-time employees.

Discussion

The article provides new evidence on how fair British employees view their organisations and the types of disadvantage at work that are most strongly related to fairness evaluations, drawing on representative national evidence. Overall, British employees are more likely to regard their organisations as fair than as unfair, although only a relatively small proportion (25%) are strongly of this view. The analyses, however, show that inequalities at work are associated with significant differences in perceptions of fairness between employees in different occupational classes – with notably lower scores for those in less skilled occupations (sales, operatives and elementary employees). In contrast, there is no difference in overall perceptions of organisational fairness between male and female employees.

Although cross-sectional data cannot establish causality, the analyses point to key factors that may underlie class differences in fairness perceptions. While among employees overall treatment by supervisors is the factor most strongly associated with perceptions of fairness, the differences between occupational classes are primarily related to differences in participation in decision-making.

This factor on its own makes the differences between the lower skilled and those in professional and managerial occupations non-significant, consistent with its theoretical salience in the sociological literature. The most important aspect of participation in this respect, however, is not task discretion (or autonomy), but organisational participation - whether or not employees feel they can influence wider organisational decisions that affect their work. Organisational participation has a strong significant effect on fairness perceptions in all classes, but its impact on class differences in fairness perceptions reflects the fact that lower skilled occupations are more disadvantaged with respect to opportunities for organisational participation than is the case for any other intrinsic work factor.

The psychosocial stressors of work intensity and job security have considerable importance for fairness perceptions for the workforce as a whole (together they are the second most important type of factor), and they are important within each class group. But they have only a moderate effect on class differences. The limited effect of insecurity is partly because the disadvantage of lower skilled occupations was relatively small, in contrast to disadvantage in participation in decision-making. The limited effect of work intensity on class differences is due to the fact that those in lower skilled occupations are less likely than those in other classes to be exposed to high work intensity. There is no evidence that the intrinsic aspects of work are less important for fairness perceptions among those in lower skilled occupations, as suggested by the instrumentalism hypothesis. Supervisory respect is more important than for employees in other class groups. Moreover, where low-skilled workers are exposed to high work intensity, the effect is stronger than in other classes, consistently with the view that moderating factors are less protective for such workers.

There are two unexpected findings. The first is with respect to gender differences. Given the consistent evidence of womens' disadvantage in pay, it could be anticipated that this would be an important factor differentiating the sexes. Comparing male and female employees in the overall workforce, however, there is no significant difference in the level of their fairness perceptions.

Moreover, the fairness perceptions of men and women are in general related to work context factors in the same way.

There is however a notable sex difference in the specific case of male and female professional employees. Female professional employees are less likely to view their organisations as fair than their male equivalents. This is primarily attributable to their greater exposure to psychosocial stressors at work – in particular to work intensity and job status insecurity. Work intensity was both more prevalent and more strongly related to perceptions of fairness among female professionals. The strength of association of job status insecurity with fairness is similar for men and women, but women in the professions are more likely to experience it.

There is also evidence of heterogeneity between women, with relative pay, low pay and job status insecurity more strongly associated with fairness among full-timers than among part-timers. The lower importance of pay for female part-timers' perceptions of fairness is consistent with the expectations of the argument that they are less invested in paid work than female full-time employees. But the fact that there is no significant difference between female full-timers and part-timers with respect to strength of the effects on fairness of most of the intrinsic features of work points to the rather different conclusion that female part-time employees emphasise pay less because they have a stronger orientation to the intrinsic, rather than the extrinsic, quality of work.

The second unexpected feature of the results is the relatively weak effects of pay levels and performance payment systems on perceptions of fairness - for employees overall, for occupational class differences and for gender differences. There is no evidence that the fairness perceptions of those in lower skilled occupations are distinctive in the strength of pay (rather than intrinsic) considerations, as implied by the instrumentalism thesis. The only significant differences were first that low pay makes a greater difference for female employees in intermediate class positions and second that pay effects were weaker for female part-time workers than for female full-timers. Speculatively, the generally limited effect of pay disadvantages may reflect two possible factors.

First, given the limited transparency of pay differentials, workers may underestimate the extent of their disadvantage. Second, they may consider that their employers have relatively limited scope in pay decisions given the pressures of the market, and this may reduce the sense that employers are behaving unfairly. These are clearly issues that require further research.

Conclusions

Several findings have particular relevance for employer and government policies aiming at increasing the sense of fairness at work. First, organisations have still far to go in convincing workers that their practices embody a high level of fairness. Second, in all occupational classes, the quality of supervisory support and respect, the pressures of work intensity and job status insecurity, and the involvement of employees in workplace decision-making are of major importance for fairness perceptions. Third, if occupational class differentials in fairness perceptions are to be reduced, particular attention needs to be paid to employees' opportunities to participate in decisions. Finally, despite its increased popularity as a management practice, the use of performance-related pay does not appear to be an effective way of enhancing employees' sense of organisational fairness.

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Table 1. Occupational Class and Perceptions of Fairness

	Means			% Strongly agree		
	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
Managers	4.14	4.17	4.18	32.1	42.3	35.8
Professionals	4.13	3.86	3.98	33.2	23.7	28.1
Assoc Profs	3.92	3.89	3.94	18.5	26.4	22.1
Admin-Sec	4.08	4.04	4.07	31.3	32.1	31.9
Skilled trades	3.95	4.18	4.00	19.4	25.9	20.2
Caring-Leisure	3.94	3.94	3.94	18.6	28.8	26.9
Sales	3.71	3.91	3.85	15.3	25.8	21.3
Operatives	3.73	3.88	3.74	15.1	37.0	18.5
Elementary	3.84	3.89	3.86	13.3	21.0	16.8
Full-time Employees	3.97	3.95	3.96	23.3	27.1	24.9
Part-time Employees	3.97	4.01	4.00	21.6	29.9	28.1
All Employees	3.97	3.96	3.96	22.7	28.0	25.3

Note: Strongly agree=average score 4.5 to 5.0. The occupational class classification is drawn from the 1st digit categories in the Standard Occupational Classification 2010. T-test sig of sex differences: <0.05=bold; <0.10=italics.

Table 2. Factors Associated with Overall Organisational Fairness: All Employees (Beta Coefficients, with controls)

	Beta Coefficient (SE)	Sig
Influence over Work Organisation	0.15 (.02)	***
Task Discretion	0.07 (.02)	***
Sup Respect	0.13 (.03)	***
Supervisory Support	0.14 (.03)	***
Sup Recognition	0.05 (.03)	(*)
Sup training	0.07 (.03)	*
Performance Pay	-0.04 (.02)	(*)
Relative Pay	0.03 (.02)	
Low Pay	-0.04 (.02)	*
Work Intensity	-0.13 (.02)	***
Employment Insecurity	-0.07 (.02)	***
Job Status Insecurity	-0.14 (.03)	***
Hours Insecurity	-0.07 (.03)	**
R2	0.32	
N	2190	

Note: *** sig <0.001; **sig <0.01; * sig <0.05; (*)=sig<0.10. Controls= age, sex, occupational class, industry, size of firm and ownership sector).

Figure 1 Proportion of Variance in Perceived Fairness Explained by Work Context Characteristics

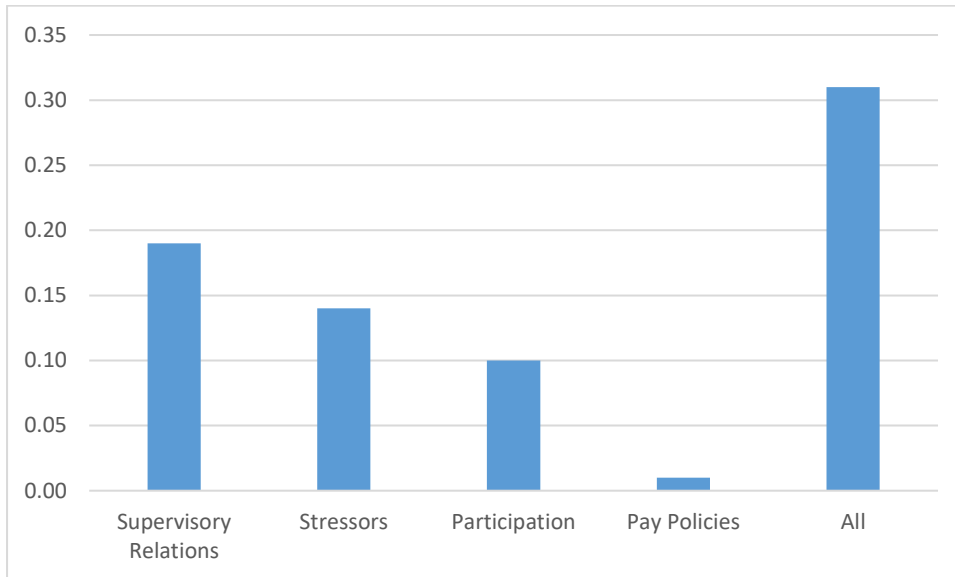
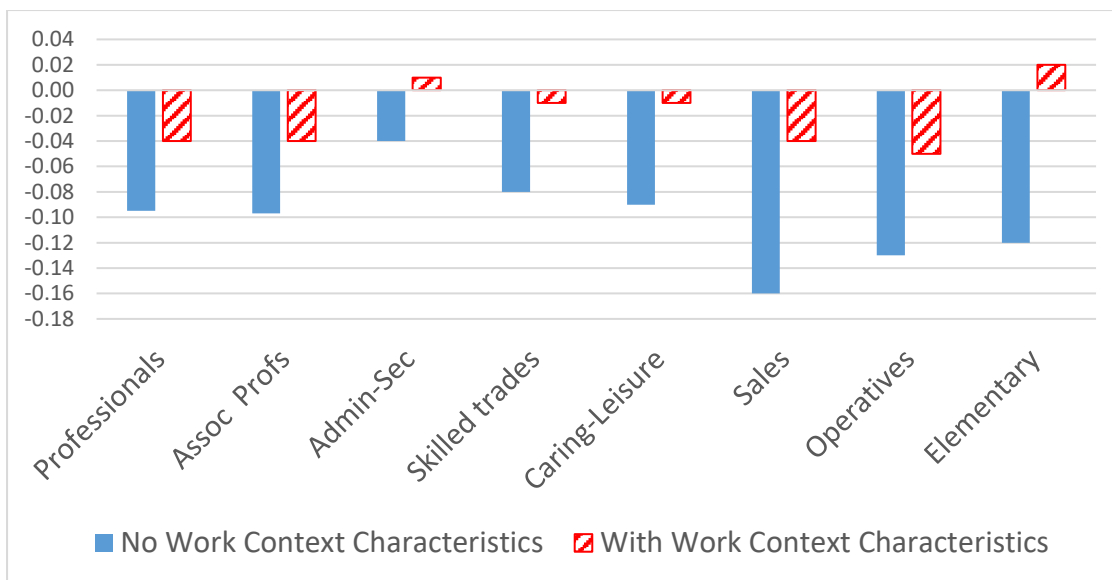


Figure 2 Class Differences in Perceived Fairness With and Without Work Context Characteristics



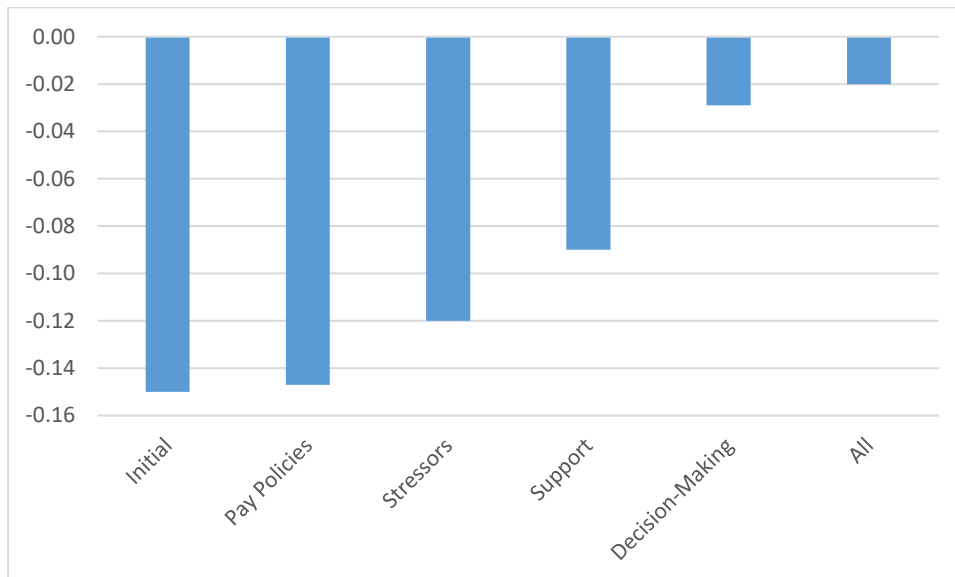
Note: Beta Coefficients. With controls for age, sex, part-time, organisational size, industry, ownership sector.

Table 3. Mean Scores and Effects on Fairness by Occupational Class (Beta Coefficients & SEs) with Controls

	Mean Scores			Effects on Fairness: Beta Coefficients and (SEs)		
	Managers- Professional	Intermediate	Lower Skilled	Managers- Professionals	Inter- mediate	Lower Skilled
Influence over Work						
Organisation	1.87	1.43	0.91	0.14 (.04)	0.14 (.03)	0.11 (.04)
Task Discretion	2.33	2.20	1.90	0.11 (.04)	<i>0.06 (.03)</i>	0.04 (.04)
Supervisory Support	3.72	3.76	3.58	0.16 (.05)	0.11 (.05)	0.17 (.07)
Sup Respect	4.42	4.36	4.13	<i>0.08 (.04)</i>	0.11 (.04)	0.24 (.05)
Sup Recognition	3.91	3.84	3.54	0.01 (.04)	<i>0.09 (.05)</i>	0.09 (.06)
Sup training	3.69	3.66	3.56	0.06 (.05)	0.10 (.04)	0.04 (.06)
Performance Pay	1.68	1.72	1.75	0.01 (.04)	-0.07 (.03)	-0.03 (.03)
Relative Pay	3.08	2.90	2.97	0.04 (.04)	0.01 (.03)	<i>0.08 (.05)</i>
Low Pay	0.03	0.13	0.36	0.02 (.03)	-0.10 (.03)	-0.01 (.05)
Work Intensity	3.29	3.04	2.93	-0.09 (.03)	-0.10 (.03)	-0.17 (.04)
Employment Insecurity	0.57	0.62	0.58	-0.12 (.03)	-0.06 (.03)	-0.03 (.04)
Job Status Insecurity	1.82	1.90	1.96	-0.17 (.04)	-0.14 (.04)	-0.13 (.05)
Hours Insecurity	1.79	1.94	2.11	-0.08 (.05)	-0.06 (.04)	-0.04 (.05)
R2				0.31	0.29	0.40
N				734	949	505

Note: In columns on effects, **Bold** =sig <0.05. *Italics* =sig <0.10. Controls= age, sex, part-time, industry, ownership sector and firm size.

Figure 3 Change in the Lower Skilled Occupational Class (Sales, Operatives and Elementary Workers) Beta Coefficients for Perceived Fairness with Different Sets of Work Context Characteristics



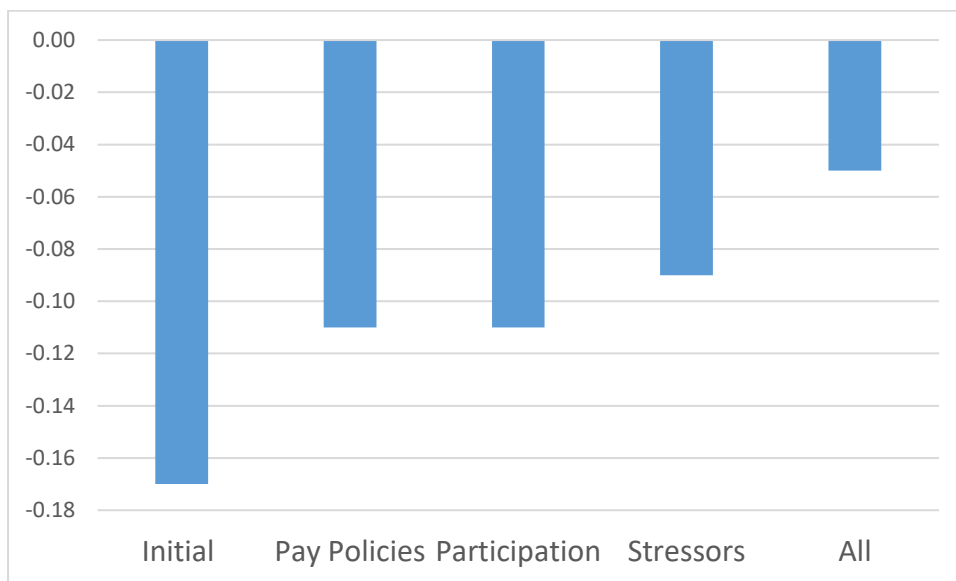
Note: Beta Coefficients, with controls for age, sex, part-time, organisational size, industry, ownership sector.

Table 4. Gender Differences in Work Context effects on Fairness (Beta Coefficients and SEs) and Significance of Interaction Effects for Female Employees Overall, in Managerial and Professional Jobs, Sex-Segregated Jobs and Part-Time Jobs.

	Effects on Fairness Male Employees	Effects on Fairness Female Employees	Sig Sex Differences All Employees +=women higher	Sig Sex Differences For Managers & Professionals +=women higher	Sig Differences Female Segregated vs Non-Segregated +=Segreg-ated Higher	Sig Differences Female Full-Time vs Part-Time +=full-time higher
Influence over Work Organisation	0.16 (.03)	0.15 (.03)				
Task Discretion	<i>0.04 (.03)</i>	0.09 (.03)		+		
Supervisory Support	0.11 (.04)	0.19 (.04)			+	
Sup Respect	0.08 (.03)	0.17 (.03)	+	+	+	
Sup Recognition	0.08 (.04)	0.02 (.04)			+	
Sup training	0.08 (.04)	0.05 (.04)			+	
Performance Pay	-0.03 (.03)	-0.06 (.03)				
Relative Pay	0.04 (.03)	0.04 (.03)				+
Low Pay	0.04 (.03)	-0.07 (.03)				+
Work Intensity	-0.09 (.03)	-0.15 (.03)	+	+		
Employment Insecurity	-0.10 (.03)	-0.06 (.03)				
Job Status Insecurity	-0.14 (.04)	-0.12 (.04)				+
Hours Insecurity	<i>-0.07 (.04)</i>	<i>-0.06 (.04)</i>				
R2	0.29	0.37				
N	1108	1081				

Note: **Bold** sig <0.05. *Italics* sig <0.10. The **significance of intraclass sex differences** was tested through a model with class* female interaction effects. There were no significant sex differences for the intermediate and working classes. The **significance of differences between female full and part-time employees** was tested through a model with female* part-time interaction effects. Controls = age, sex, industry, ownership sector, firm size (and part-time in first four columns)

Figure 4 Change in Female Beta Coefficients for Perceived Fairness Among Professional Employees with Different Sets of Work Context Characteristics



Note: Beta Coefficients, with controls for age, sex, part-time, organisational size industry, ownership sector.