

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# The Role of Work Alienation in the Relationship Between Perceived Organizational Justice and Counterproductive Work Behaviors

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### Abstract

Previous studies supported the relationship between the lack of perceived organizational justice and counterproductive behaviors at work, and in the current research the emphasis is on the explanatory mechanism of alienation. This study aims to investigate whether work alienation could be a potential mediator in the relationship between the two constructs. In an attempt to research an explanatory mechanism that is less addressed in the literature, a non-experimental cross-sectional study was conducted, based on a sample of 145 participants from different industries. The statistical analysis' results indicated that the lack of perceived organizational justice is a significant predictor of counterproductive behavior. Furthermore, workplace alienation has completely mediated the relationship between the lack of perceived organizational justice and employees' counterproductive behaviors. These findings reiterate the role and importance of employees' perceptions of organizational justice in the emergence and possible reduction of counterproductive behaviors that are detrimental to both the organization and individuals. The data obtained also supported a possible explanatory mechanism of their relationship.

### Keywords

perceived organizational justice, counterproductive behaviors, work alienation

This study addresses the understudied concept of work alienation in the relationship between organizational justice and counterproductive work behaviors. This work is original in terms of considering together in an explanatory model of counterproductive work behaviors, the concepts of organizational justice and work alienation.

Numerous studies in the literature support a relationship between perceived organizational justice and counterproductive behaviors at work (Chernyak-Hai & Tziner, 2014; Dalal, 2005; Fox et al., 2001). There are several explanatory mechanisms (e.g.,

burnout; Wu et al.; 2016) regarding the effect of the perceived organizational justice on counterproductive behaviors at work. One of these possible explanatory mechanisms is the less studied concept of workplace alienation (Ceylan & Sulu, 2011; Jesús Suárez-Mendoza & Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2008; Nair & Vohra, 2009). Although researchers have repeatedly proposed, as a criticism of the construct, that alienation is the reverse of involvement in work, no significant negative correlation between these two constructs was found in a meta-analysis conducted by Chiaburu and his peers (2014), there was also

a considerable difference between job satisfaction and work alienation, and, in general, the two constructs can be easily distinguished.

According to Nair and Vohra (2009), other possible causes that led to a relative lack of attention to the alienation concept in the organizational field studies are its excessive use in the sociological literature, an aversion to the negative tone of the construct, a conceptual confusion with other terms and a poor operationalization and measurement of the construct.

Based on these observations, one of this paper's goals is to examine the relationship between perceived organizational justice and its effect on counterproductive behaviors, and also to investigate the mediating effect of work alienation.

## **Theoretical Framework**

**Counterproductive work behaviors.** Every year, counterproductive work behaviors and their consequences lead to excessive costs for organizations and companies around the world. The estimated economic costs for deviant behaviors such as theft, absenteeism or violence varies by source, but usually reaches billions of dollars (Bennet & Robinson, 2000) and their effects are detrimental to both the employer and the employee (Khan et al., 2013).

In the recent years, there has been a growing interest in organizational research regarding counterproductive behaviors at work, such as aggressiveness, interpersonal conflicts, sabotage and theft. The basis for these behaviors is the damage to the organization by directly affecting its functioning or property or by harming employees in a way that will reduce their effectiveness (Fox et al., 2001). A large amount of research has been conducted to discover the external (e.g., perceived justice, job satisfaction, organizational commitment/engagement) and internal antecedents (e.g., personality characteristics: conscientiousness, positive affectivity and negative affectivity) of counterproductive behaviors (Dalal, 2005; Reflector et al., 2006).

## **The relationship between organizational justice and counterproductive behaviors**

One of the most influential conceptual paradigms used to understand workplace behaviors and that also made it possible to study the relationship between perceived organizational justice and counterproductive behavior possible is Social Exchange Theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). There are several variations for social exchange, but organizational models have some common features: initial treatment to an individual, the emergence of both attitudinal and behavioral responses, and the formation of relationships (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Based on this theory, numerous studies claim that the employees' responses to unfair treatment of the organization take the form of counterproductive behaviors (Wu et al., 2016). The above-mentioned authors' statements were reiterated by Colquitt and his collaborators (2013) who indicated that the theory of social exchange was most used in examining reactions to the perceived justice.

Two meta-analyses conducted by Cohen-Charash and Spector (2001) and Colquitt et al. (2001) identified that organizational justice is an important antecedent for organizational commitment, job satisfaction and organizational civic behavior among employees. At the same time, it is inferred that the lack of perceived justice produces counterproductive behaviors and negative results.

In line with the above, the relationship between organizational justice and counterproductive work behaviors has been observed in a number of other studies. One of these studies is the one carried out by Monanu and his colleagues (2015) whose results supported the hypothesis that the dimensions of organizational justice had a significant impact on the dimensions of counterproductive behaviors in the workplace. At the same time, perceived interactional justice scores were negatively correlated with counterproductive behaviors in the workplace (Le Roy et al., 2012), in a study that specifically investigated the dimension of interactional justice and its effect on

counterproductive behaviors, mediated by the role of negative emotions.

Moreover, Fox and its collaborators (2001) also state that „Adams' Equity Theory and empirical work (1963) suggest that inequity (injustice) motivates people to have adaptive responses in a variety of ways, both cognitive and behavioral” (p. 294). The results of their study argued that workplace stressors, including perceived injustice, are linked to both negative emotions and counterproductive behaviors.

Based on the arguments presented, the first hypothesis states:

*H1: Employees' perception of organizational justice will be negatively associated with counterproductive behaviors, as such, lack of perceived justice determines a higher occurrence of counterproductive behaviors.*

### **The mediating effect of alienation in the workplace.**

Fox and his colleagues (2001) investigated the lack of perceived justice as a stressor in the workplace, based on numerous comparisons between work-related stress and organizational justice as explanations of counterproductive organizational behavior, including the roles of emotional responses and affective dispositions. The authors have reached a unifying framework for understanding counterproductive behaviors that incorporate constraints, conflict, perceived justice, control (autonomy), emotional responses and affective dispositions as antecedents of distinct categories of behavioral responses. The data also showed that negative emotions acted as an explanatory mechanism by mediating the relationships between workplace stressors and counterproductive behaviors. In the same register, that of explanatory mechanisms, the results of another study carried out by Wu and his colleagues (2016) supported the phenomenon of burnout as a mediator of the relationship between perceived organizational injustice and counterproductive behaviors, assuming that the premise that a low level of perceived organizational justice can lead to stress-related issues such as burnout and counterproductive behaviors. The results of their research supported moral identity as a moderator of the relationship between burnout and the level of perceived organizational justice.

The current research aims to study alienation as an explanatory mechanism of the relationship between the lack of perceived organizational justice and counterproductive behaviors.

From a historical point of view, the concept of work alienation has its origin in Marx's writings. He argued that creative work is a basic aspect of human nature and that this "need" was most fully satisfied in the work activity (Mottaz, 1981). The roots of the concept are highlighted in Seeman's alienation model (1983), a prominent author in the study of alienation, who treats its measurement from a multidimensional perspective. Work alienation has also been treated as a state of dissociation (a cognitive sense of separation) in relation to another element in the environment (Kanungo, 1979) and psychological disengagement from the task (Banai & Reisel, 2007).

According to Seeman (1991) most of the studies related to alienation contain a certain concept of "discrepancy". Applied in the workplace, this discrepancy usually takes the form of a gap between perceptions of the objective work situation and certain individual concerns such as needs, values, ideals, desires or expectations. The concept of alienation has been approached in literature in one form or another, but in the past, it has often been found under other names. This is indicated, for example, by the prominence of concepts and measures found in the literature, which are closely /related to the sub-dimensions of alienation (e.g., ambiguity, social isolation at work).

It was found that alienation was measured in a considerable number of different ways. The meaning and measurement of work alienation is problematic and ambiguous. The ambiguity surrounding the concept of alienation is rooted in a number of factors. Firstly, the concept has been treated on various occasions as one-dimensional or multidimensional, and in research so far there is no consensus on the definition and operationalization of the construct (Chiaburu et al., 2014; Nair & Vohra, 2009). In the current research, the concept of alienation is seen and measured through the conceptualization of Nair and Vohra's theory (2009), which observed the notion of

estrangement or separation as a common theme in the concept of alienation. Based on this observation, the authors argued that "estrangement or disconnection from work, context or self" is an operational definition of work alienation. The new scale proposed by them was designed to measure alienation, especially at the workplace, and help detect and remedy employee alienation.

Regarding the concept of alienation, addressed in the current research, the data obtained by Ceylan and Sulu (2011) indicated that work alienation was influenced by the dimensions of organizational injustice. A study by Jesús and Zoghbi (2008) also concluded that work alienation acts as an explanatory mechanism between perceptions of the concept of person-organization fit and the degree to which employees are prone to retaliation by decreasing organizational citizenship behaviors. Following these results, the authors propose alienation as a trigger mechanism of retributive behaviors depending on the perceived organizational justice. It is important to note that there is a negative association between the concept of organizational citizenship behaviors and counterproductive behaviors (Dalal, 2005). On a note of concordance, Nair and Vohra (2010) propose, as future directions, research into the link between work alienation and outcomes such as deviance at work, and focusing on exploring the consequences of alienation.

Corroborating the previously presented evidence, the present study predicts the effect of alienation as an explanatory mechanism in the relationship between the lack of perceived organizational justice and counterproductive behaviors. Based on the existence of the various explanatory mechanisms, some of them mentioned above, and their inability to fully explain the relationship, we expect that the direct effect of the antecedent on the dependent variable will remain significant with the introduction of the mediator in the equation. Thus, the second hypothesis of the study is formulated.

*H2: Work alienation will partially mediate the relationship between perceived organizational justice and counterproductive behavior.*

## Method

The study is based on a non-experimental research model. The analyzed variables were organizational justice as an independent variable, counterproductive work behaviors as a dependent variable and work alienation – the presumed mediating variable. Due to the inability to control or manipulate the independent variable, the research design was cross-sectional.

## Procedure

The data was collected through a Google form that was distributed online on social networks from 26 April to 12 May 2020. Participants were informed about the study and the conditions of inclusion (the respondent should have a job), about the confidentiality of the data provided and about the possibility of withdrawing at any time. Participation was voluntary and anonymous and no personal data was required. No incentives were used.

## Participants

To determine the sample size for mediation analysis, power analysis was performed using G \* Power (Faul et al., 2009). The analysis was based on the multiple linear regression that will be used for this study. With an average effect size of .15, alpha of .05, a standard power level of .80 and a total of 2 predictors, the power analysis' results showed that a minimum of 68 participants were needed to achieve an adequate power level for this study. Following the preliminary data analysis of the data, cases with missing values or identified as extreme values were excluded. The final sample consisted of 145 people.

The sample consisted of 145 employees from private (58.6%) and public (41.4%) institutions, from various sectors of activity. Respondents were both male (21.4%) and female (78.6%), aged between 20 and 64 ( $M=35.14$ ;  $SD=10.71$ ). Of these, 85.5% have a university degree and 14.5% have only secondary education. The length of the working period at the participants' current job varies as follows: less than 1 year (19.3%), between 1-5 years (41.4%), between 5-10 years (11.7%) and over 10 years (27.6%).

Regarding the size of the organization, 19.3% of them work in a micro-organization (1-9 employees), 17.2% in a small organization (10-49 employees), 35.2% in a medium organization (50-249 employees) and 28.3% in a large organization (over 250 employees). The work schedule is part-time (12.4%) or full-time (87.6%).

Table 1 shows the demographic information of the sample. Before actually testing the hypotheses, the variables were subjected to a preliminary analysis. Data was complete and no missing values were identified. Scores considered extreme values were eliminated, resulting in a sample of 145 participants.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for demographic variable*

Variables	N	Percent (%)
Age	M = 35.14	SD = 10.71
Gender		
Male	31	21.4%
Female	114	78.6%
Education		
High school	21	14.5%
University/College	124	85.5%
Work sector		
Public Sector	60	41.4%
Private Sector	85	58.6%
Organization Size		
Micro	28	19.3%
Small	25	17.2%
Medium	51	35.2%
Large	41	28.3%
Work schedule		
Part-time	18	12.4%
Full-time	127	87.6%
Length of current employment		
0-1 years	28	19.3%
1-5 years	60	41.4%
5-10 years	17	11.7%
+10 years	40	27.6%

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation; N = 145

## Instruments

**Counterproductive work behaviors.** Counterproductive behaviors at work were measured using the Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist (CWB-C) 32-item version (Spector et al., 2006), translated into

Romanian by Coralia Sulea and Dragoş Iliescu and contains 32 items ("Purposely wasted your employer's materials/supplies."; "You stole something that belonged to your employer."; "You did not follow the instructions intentionally."), measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 2 = Once or

twice a year, 3 = Once or twice a month, 4 = Once or twice per week, 5 = Daily). The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.76.

#### **Perceived organizational justice.**

Perceived organizational justice was measured using the Organizational Justice Scale (ORGJUST) (Colquitt, 2001) translated into Romanian by Coralia Sulea. It contains 20 items ("Have you been able to express your views and feelings during these procedures?"; "Does your outcome reflect the effort you have put into your work?"; "Has he/she treated you in a polite manner?"), measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = „To a small extent” to 5 = „To a very large extent”. The scale had a high level of internal consistency, as determined by the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.93.

**Work alienation.** Work alienation was measured using the Work Alienation Questionnaire (Nair & Vohra, 2009), translated into Romanian in this study. It contains 8 items ("I do not enjoy my work"; "At work, I feel estranged/disconnected from myself."; "I do not feel connected to the events in my workplace."; "Over the years I have become disillusioned about my work."), measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging

from 1 = „Total disagreement” to 7 = „Total agreement”. The scale had a high level of internal consistency, as determined by the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.88.

## **Results**

All data were analyzed using SPSS 24. Initially, descriptive statistics were obtained for all variables included in the study.

In order to test the distribution for normality and multicollinearity, a multiple regression analysis was performed. The analysis of the tolerance index (.87) and the VIF coefficient (1.14) indicated values within the normal limits, not indicating a multicollinearity problem. For normality, the distribution of residual values was analyzed. There was an independence of residual values, indicated by the Durbin-Watson value (1.602). There was also homoscedasticity assessed by visual inspection of the Scatter/Dot graph consisting of studentized residuals values (Y axis) and unstandardized predicted values (X axis). Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations for all three variables.

Table 2. *Inter-scale correlations*

	M	SD	1	2
1 Perceived organizational justice	3.77	.36		
2 Work alienation	2.32	.50	-.349**	
3 Counterproductive work behaviors	1.31	.27	-.282**	.44**

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation; N = 145. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ .

The correlations between the variables have small and moderate values, all statistically significant. There is a small negative correlation between perceived organizational justice and counterproductive behaviors ( $r = -.28$ ;  $p < .001$ ), i.e., the lack of perceived justice at work is associated with the emergence of counterproductive behaviors. At the same time, perceived organizational justice is negatively associated with alienation ( $r = -.34$ ;  $p < .001$ ), which means that employees who perceive higher levels of lack

of justice are more likely to experience high levels of alienation. There is also a statistically significant positive correlation between work alienation and counterproductive behaviors ( $r = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which means that an increase in work alienation is associated with a higher level of counterproductive behaviors.

The hypotheses were tested using PROCESS v3.5. The research model examined the effect of the lack of perceived organizational justice on counterproductive behaviors through work alienation as an

explanatory mechanism. This program runs multiple regression analyzes providing information about the total effect, directly and indirectly. The advantage of this software, compared to the algorithm proposed by Baron & Kenny (1986), is a greater statistical power and indications of the statistical significance of the indirect effect, using the bootstrap method.

The first hypothesis (H1: Employees' perception of organizational justice will be negatively associated with counterproductive behaviors, as such, lack of perceived justice determines a higher occurrence of counterproductive behaviors) corresponds to the total effect. The results of the regression analysis displayed by PROCESS indicates that the lack of perceived organizational justice is a significant predictor of counterproductive behaviors ( $\beta = -.28, p < .001$ ). Perceived organizational justice represents 8% of the variance of counterproductive behaviors ( $R^2 = .08, p < .001$ ). Perceived organizational justice is also a significant predictor of work alienation at work ( $\beta = -.34, p < .001$ ), explaining 12% of its variance ( $R^2 = .12, p < .001$ ).

A final regression analysis presents both the relationship between work alienation and

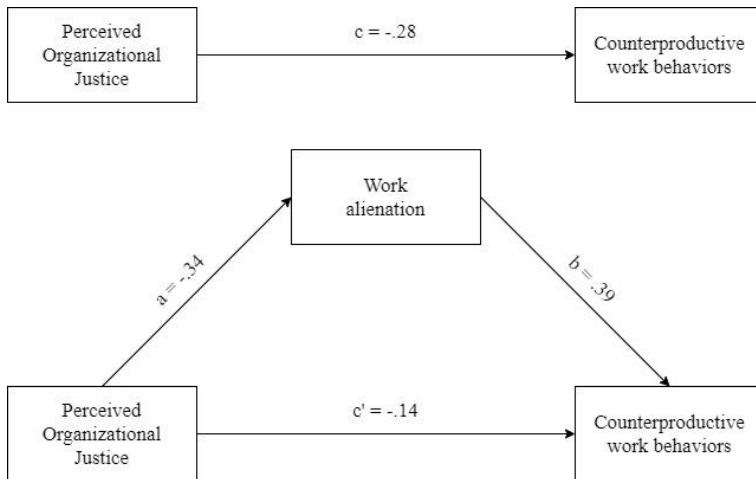
counterproductive behaviors and the direct effect of the mediation relationship. The results indicate that work alienation is a predictor of counterproductive behaviors ( $\beta = .39, p < .001$ ). Together with the lack of perceived organizational justice, alienation at work explains 21% of the variance of counterproductive behaviors ( $R^2 = .21, p < .001$ ).

The detailed results and coefficients for these variables, as well as the results of the mediation analysis that test the second hypothesis (H2: *Work alienation will partially mediate the relationship between perceived organizational justice and counterproductive behavior*) are presented in Table 3. The results of the direct effect show that the relationship between perceived organizational justice and counterproductive behavior has become statistically insignificant when controlling for work alienation ( $\beta = -.14, p > .05$ ). The analysis of the indirect effect, i.e. the effect of the lack of perceived justice on counterproductive behaviors through work alienation, showed that zero was not within the confidence interval, suggesting a statistically significant indirect effect. Thus, it is indicated the existence of a total mediation.

Table 3. *Total, direct and indirect effect of perceived organizational justice on counterproductive behaviors*

	Coefficient $\beta$	Standard deviation/SE	R <sup>2</sup>	CI95%
Total effect	-.28***	.05	.08***	
Direct effect	-.14	.05		
Indirect effect	-.13	.05		[-.24, -.05]

Note:  $p > .05$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$



Note: Reported values correspond to standardized coefficients (); a - effect of perceived organizational justice on work alienation; b - effect of work alienation on counterproductive work behaviours; c - total effect; c' - direct effect

Figure 1. Final Research Model

## Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the extent to which the lack of perceived organizational justice is associated with counterproductive behaviors and to test whether work alienation mediates this relationship. The results indicated that the lack of perceived organizational justice is a significant predictor of counterproductive behaviors, in line with the results previously obtained by other authors in the organizational literature (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Le Roy et al., 2012).

These results can be explained from the perspective of Social Exchange Theory and Equity Theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Fox et al., 2001). The contribution of the current study was to treat work alienation as an attitudinal response to exchanges and unfairness in the organization.

Summarizing the model, the lack of perceived organizational justice makes employees more prone to feel a lack of fairness and determines the appearance of a series of adaptive responses, both cognitive and emotional. Thus, the employee, in response to the perceived stimulus, through the prism of those felt cognitively and emotionally, will engage/be involved in a series of counterproductive behaviors.

The second hypothesis was confirmed, the data indicated a total mediation in the relationship between the lack of perceived justice, work alienation and counterproductive behaviors. According to these results, work alienation is a mechanism by which the lack of perceived justice exerts its effect on counterproductive behaviors.

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

A number of theoretical and practical implications emerge from the current research. Firstly, from a theoretical perspective, perceived organizational justice and counterproductive behaviors were previously investigated in the light of Social Exchange Theory, Social Inequity Theory and in the theoretical framework of stressors as explanations for the organizational behavior proposed by Fox and its collaborators (2001). Similarly, the current research is built on these theoretical frameworks, thus contributing to their support through the data obtained that indicate the existence of the theorized relationship. Secondly, another theoretical implication is the introduction of alienation as an explanatory mechanism of the relationship.

The practical implications of the study result in underlining the effect of the lack of

perceived organizational justice on the manifestation of counterproductive behaviors. This reiterates the importance of the organization's efforts to reduce employees' negative perceptions of various phenomena in the organization, such as perceived justice, in order to reduce undesirable behaviors and their associated costs. This would contribute to the well-being of organizations in particular and a lack of significant financial losses through the aforementioned mentioned manifestations (e.g., absenteeism, theft, sabotage, conflict, etc.) when looking at organizations in a global manner.

Also, the possibility of addressing the alienation felt by employees is another relevant practical implication. Thus, strategies can be developed to combat the sense of disconnection and alienation at work. In doing so, important variables can include the types of leaders, the relationships between employees or within groups, but also the complex dynamics and types of climate that arise in the organizational context.

### **Research Limitations**

Cross-sectional studies are subject to many concerns and methodological limitations (Teti, 2006), which is also one of the limits of the current research. The nature of the mediation analysis itself is a causal one, in the current study it is inferred the causal relationship between the predictor (perceived injustice) and the dependent variable (counterproductive behaviors), having as an explanatory mechanism the mediating variable work alienation. Obviously, additional studies are needed to support causal inferences.

The questionnaires were administered at the same time, the data for each variable being obtained together. Participants reported the level of perceived organizational justice, the degree to which they engage in counterproductive behaviors at work, and the level of alienation felt. Collecting data at the same time using a single method, from the same source, through self-report questionnaires, has attracted the skepticism of the authors over time, a main criticism being the alleged phenomenon of common method bias. Also, given the negative nature of the

questionnaire measuring counterproductive behaviors, the researchers argue that it may be affected by variables such as social desirability, which refers to participants' tendency to deliberately or unconsciously represent themselves in a favorable light (Bowling & Gruys, 2010; Podsakoff & Organ, 1986).

However, Lance and Vandenberg (2009) argue against the exaggeration of the common method bias phenomenon in the organizational literature, which seems to have reached the rank of "urban legend", arguing that it is possible, but not necessary, to affect the relationships between variables. Regarding social desirability, which is manifested, for example, when the participant reports things about himself in order to obtain a stake (e.g., obtaining a job at a job interview), the authors claim that it does not manifest itself similarly or necessarily in the different types of self-report questionnaires. Due to the absence of a stake, we tend to believe that social desirability was not an important factor in reporting counterproductive behaviors in the current study. A future direction could be the addition of a questionnaire to measure the tendency to respond in a desirable way, as a control variable and the adoption of a multi-method design.

Additionally, questionnaires that measure counter-productive behaviors are assumed to be the subject of response distortion by the participants (Stewart et al., 2009). Therefore, the literature notes researchers' initiatives to develop questionnaires such as other-report ones, in which colleagues/teammates, supervisors or the leader describe the incidence of counterproductive behaviors among colleagues. In this regard, in a meta-analysis carried out by Berry and its colleagues (2012), which compares the self-report questionnaires and other-report counterproductive behaviors, the patterns and the magnitude of relationships with other variables were mostly similar, and the other-report questionnaires often do not bring a relevant incremental level of variation compared to the self-report ones, at the same time the value of the first ones is not denied. The authors also state that the reporting of counterproductive behaviors is more likely to

be more accurate as the number of guarantees of anonymity increases, which suggests that researchers can obtain better data when participants perceive their responses as more anonymous, as is done in the current study, both by not having to enter the name or any other kind of identification code in the questionnaires distributed to participants, and by reiterating the anonymity in the description of the study that was available to participants.

Considering that two concepts are multidimensional (organizational justice and counterproductive work behaviors), and that we use the global scores, it would be informative in further studies to investigate this effects separately. It is largely known the dimensions of organizational justice have different outcomes, and, in consequence, there is possible that the explanatory mechanisms between these dimensions and their outcomes are different.

The current study identified that work alienation completely mediates the relationship between organizational injustice and counterproductive behaviors. Future research could focus on introducing several variables into the equation, such as personality characteristics: conscientiousness, negative affectivity; other job characteristics, organizational climate, person-environment matching, civic behaviors, etc., thus providing a more comprehensive framework of current variables and various possible interactions.

The theoretical framework provided by the current study and the data obtained support the desirability of acting to reduce the lack of perceived organizational justice felt by employees, in order to improve employee attitudes and reduce counterproductive behaviors within organizations. Managers should be interested in the attitudes of their employees because attitudes influence behavior and indicate potential problems. Evidence suggests that managers' efforts to improve employee attitudes are likely to lead to positive results, including greater organizational effectiveness, greater customer satisfaction and increased profits.

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