Getting Even or Moving On? Power, Procedural Justice, and Types of Offense as Predictors of Revenge, Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Avoidance in Organizations

Karl Aquino
University of Delaware

Thomas M. Tripp
Washington State University

A field study and an experimental study examined relationships among organizational variables and various responses of victims to perceived wrongdoing. Both studies showed that procedural justice climate moderates the effect of organizational variables on the victim’s revenge, forgiveness, reconciliation, or avoidance behaviors. In Study 1, a field study, absolute hierarchical status enhanced forgiveness and reconciliation, but only when perceptions of procedural justice climate were high; relative hierarchical status increased revenge, but only when perceptions of procedural justice climate were low. In Study 2, a laboratory experiment, victims were less likely to endorse vengeance or avoidance depending on the type of wrongdoing, but only when perceptions of procedural justice climate were high.

Keywords: revenge, forgiveness, procedural justice climate, power

A growing number of empirical studies have examined how individuals respond to perceived injustice or interpersonal offense in organizations. Much of this research has focused on revenge or other types of aggressive behaviors (e.g., Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; Bies & Tripp, 1996; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Skarlicki, Folger, & Tesluk, 1999; Tripp & Bies, 1997). However, not every employee who feels wronged wants or seeks revenge. Sometimes people choose nonaggressive responses such as forgiveness and reconciliation (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998). Relative to research on revenge, forgiveness and reconciliation have received limited attention from organizational researchers. But because different responses to offense are possible, an important theoretical and practical question is, What do employees do when they are offended and why do they do it? By answering this question, managers may be better equipped to shape offense victims’ responses to being wronged so that they preserve peace, justice, and productivity within the organization.

Past studies have identified psychological factors that might motivate different responses to a workplace offense. Examples of such variables include blame attributions (e.g., Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Weiner, 1995), social–cognitive dynamics (Bies, Tripp, & Kramer, 1997), personality (Emmons, 2000), empathetic emotions (McCullough et al., 1997, 1998), and the sophistication of an individual’s moral reasoning (Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989). By contrast, there are few empirical studies of organizational factors that might influence revenge, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Organizational factors should be considered if researchers want to fully understand how negative emotions generated by workplace offenses are channeled into either positive or negative outcomes. The question we asked in this article is what forces in a victim’s work environment—forces that an organization or even an individual manager can control—may affect the victim’s choice of coping response? We conducted two studies to try to answer this question.

Study 1: The Effect of Power and Procedural Justice Climate

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine three organizational factors that might shape responses to harm or wrongdoing in the workplace: relative hierarchical status of the victim, absolute hierarchical status of the victim, and procedural justice climate. We chose these variables because previous research suggests that they influence revenge (e.g., Aquino et al., 2001). We wanted to examine whether these findings extend to forgiveness and reconciliation. Also, past studies have found that specific acts of injustice can motivate revenge (Bies & Tripp, 1996; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). We examined whether these findings extend to perceptions of the organizational climate of procedural justice. What is novel about our approach is that rather than looking at how various workplace offenses are perceived as unjust, which many other
studies have addressed, we looked at how perceptions of justice climate might affect employees’ understanding of how to deal with workplace offenses that have already occurred. Specifically, we examined whether procedural justice climate attenuates or amplifies the effects of relative hierarchical status and absolute hierarchical status on revenge, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

**Theoretical Background**

**Revenge, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation: Responses to Workplace Offense**

We treated revenge, forgiveness, and reconciliation as coping strategies for dealing with a workplace offense. That is, these responses help the victim manage negative, offense-generated emotions and cognitions. We defined *revenge* as an effort by the victim of harm to inflict damage, injury, discomfort, or punishment on the party judged responsible for causing the harm (Aquino et al., 2001; Stuckless & Goranson, 1992). Forgiveness is a complex response that has been conceptualized as both an intra- and an interpersonal aspect by defining forgiveness as “a willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment, condemnation, and subtle revenge toward the offender who acts unjustly while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion generosity or even love toward him/her.” Alternatively, McCullough and his colleagues (1997, pp. 321-322) defined forgiveness as “the set of motivational changes whereby one becomes decreasingly motivated to retaliate against the offending partner, decreasingly motivated to maintain estrangement from the offender, and increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill toward the offender despite the offender’s hurtful actions.” In our article, we differentiated between the intrapersonal and the interpersonal aspects emphasized by other writers by defining *forgiveness* as the internal act of relinquishing anger, resentment, and the desire to seek revenge against the offender (e.g., Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991, p. 108) focused on its intrapersonal aspect by defining forgiveness as “a willingness to abandon one’s right to revenge as an abuse of one’s powerful position.” We focused on two dimensions of power that have been identified by past theory and empirical research as being consequential in the process of responding to a workplace offense. These are the victim’s formal status relative to his or her offender (e.g., Bies & Tripp, 1996; Heider, 1958; Kim, Smith, & Brigham, 1998) and the victim’s absolute hierarchical position within the organization (Aquino et al., 2001).

The first dimension captures who has more power—the victim or the offender—in a specific offense episode. In a conflict between two employees, the more highly placed employee will more often prevail because he or she has more resources to expend, such as the ability to reward and punish others with information, money, or choice job assignments (Lawler & Yoon, 1993). Furthermore, a victim may find it more advantageous to maintain a relationship with a high-status offender than with a low-status offender, thus motivating prosocial coping responses and discouraging revenge. We labeled this dimension of power *relative hierarchical status*. The second dimension of power is how highly the victim is placed in the organization independent of the offender’s position. We posited that this dimension is important because it can impose normative constraints on people in higher status roles (Hogan & Emler, 1981; Tripp & Bies, 1997). We also argued that having high rather than low status makes people less sensitive to identity-threatening events (Aquino & Douglas, 2003). We labeled this second dimension of power *absolute hierarchical status*.

The two dimensions sound similar because they are based in part or in whole on the victim’s position, but there is a critical difference. Relative hierarchical status is concerned with the behavioral opportunities the victim has in a specific offense episode, whereas absolute hierarchical status affects the degree to which the victim experiences psychic and normative pressures to respond in certain ways over multiple episodes. In other words, in the case of relative hierarchical status, the question a victim considers is, “What can I do?” In the case of absolute hierarchical status, the victims asks, “What should I do?” We now present a theoretical rationale for why we expected these two dimensions of power to influence the victim’s response to an offense.

**Relative hierarchical status.** When harmed by a superior, a victim is likely to be inhibited from seeking revenge because the offender is well positioned for counter-revenge (Aquino et al., 2001; Bies et al., 1997; Heider, 1958; Kim et al., 1998). Therefore, we posited that when the victim has lower status than the offender and thus prefers not to seek revenge, the victim will tend to rely on the organization to punish the offender. In contrast, people who have been harmed by someone with lower status have less fear of serious counter-revenge (Heider, 1958). Second, people with higher status may find it particularly insulting to be harmed by a subordinate, by whom they expect to be treated with deference (Kim et al., 1998), so they may believe that an aggressive response is necessary to enforce social deference. Finally, the person harmed by someone of inferior status may believe that a failure to retaliate might be perceived by other subordinates as a sign of weakness, thus inviting future transgressions. For these reasons, we proposed that when the victim has higher status than the offender and is thus willing and able to seek revenge, the victim will seek revenge.

**Power and Status**

Our basic argument is that victims will not seek vengeance when the power dynamics of the situation make the costs of doing so too high (e.g., counterretaliation from a boss; peers judging revenge as an abuse of one’s powerful position). We focused on two dimensions of power that have been identified by past theory and empirical research as being consequential in the process of responding to a workplace offense. These are the victim’s formal status relative to his or her offender (e.g., Bies & Tripp, 1996; Heider, 1958; Kim, Smith, & Brigham, 1998) and the victim’s absolute hierarchical position within the organization (Aquino et al., 2001).
Hypothesis 1: Revenge is more likely when the victim has higher rather than lower status than the offender.

We also expected relative hierarchical status to influence forgiveness. When victims have lower status than their offenders and revenge is not possible or wise, then the victim might be more open to executing alternative ways of coping with the discomfort of offense-generated emotions. Forgiveness is one such alternative. Bies et al. (1997) argued that victims of harm experience anger and that they must somehow vent that anger. When victims cannot or will not cope with their anger by exacting revenge, they may sometimes choose forgiveness to relieve psychological distress and release debilitating emotions like anger and resentment (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991; McCullough et al., 1997). Because forgiveness implies that the victim forgives revenge, the factors that make revenge less likely should make forgiveness more likely. Thus, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 2: Forgiveness is more likely when the victim has lower rather than higher status than the offender.

Relative hierarchical status should also affect reconciliation. Retraining from revenge helps the victim avoid counterretaliation. But if the victim takes the further step of reconciling with the offender, then the relationship with the offender may be strengthened. If this offender has higher formal status than the victim, this may allow the victim to secure rewards (e.g., political and social advantages) that a higher status offender usually controls (Shriver, 1995). In short, forgiving rather than seeking revenge is about avoiding further punishment from the offender and “dialing down” negative emotions. Going further by reconciling with the offender may be, in part, about de-escalating conflict and securing future rewards. We expected this response, like forgiveness, to be undertaken when the victim’s opportunities for revenge are limited. The following hypothesis tested this prediction:

Hypothesis 3: Reconciliation is more likely when the victim has lower rather than higher status than the offender.

Absolute hierarchical status. For employees at the low end of a social status hierarchy, defending what little status they possess from external threats can be a powerful source of motivation (Daly & Wilson, 1988). Although nearly all people require social validation, some need it more than others. In particular, people who lack an abundant supply of symbolic, self-affirming resources (e.g., prestigious titles, important assignments, high salaries, positions of authority) may be more sensitive to interpersonal slights and insults than those who possess a surplus of such resources (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Daly and Wilson (1988), for example, showed that many homicides are triggered by what most people would consider to be “trivial” insults (e.g., being given a dirty look, being shoved by someone at a bar). From the perspective of men whose lives offered few opportunities to acquire status or self-affirming resources, violent retaliation against personal insults allowed them to preserve what little status and self-respect they had.

Aquino and his colleagues (e.g., Aquino et al., 2001) extended this argument into the workplace context by suggesting that employees with low absolute status are more likely to seek revenge than those with high absolute status, a prediction that was supported by their data. In another study, Aquino and Douglas (2003) found that employees who had low absolute status were more likely to exhibit antisocial behavior in response to identity threats than were those with high status. On the basis of theoretical arguments and prior empirical evidence, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 4: Absolute hierarchical status is negatively related to revenge.

Procedural Justice Climate

Formal procedures are the principal mechanisms by which organizations promote just outcomes and provide redress to victims of workplace injustice. Common experiences with respect to such procedures can create a perception of a procedural justice climate (Colquitt, Noe, & Jackson, 2002; Naumann & Bennett, 2000). Previous research by Skarlicki and his colleagues (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Skarlicki et al., 1999) has shown that perceptions of procedural justice with respect to a specific act or event are negatively associated with revenge. We expected this finding to extend to the construct of procedural justice climate.

This prediction was based on a functional view of procedures, which implies that when managers implement procedures fairly, employees should believe their interests are protected by the organization. However, when organizational procedures are perceived as being unfair, employees’ confidence in procedures as justice-restoring mechanisms drops. On the basis of this instrumental model of procedural justice (Thibaut & Walker, 1975), we expected people who perceive organizational procedures to be unfair to rely less on these procedures to ensure that those who harm them get what they deserve. Instead, victims may want to take justice “into their own hands” by seeking personal revenge. Fair procedures, though, should discourage such personal vendettas. The following hypothesis tested these arguments:

Hypothesis 5: Favorable perceptions of a procedural justice climate are negatively related to revenge.

We expected the hypothesized relationship between procedural justice climate and revenge to extend to forgiveness and reconciliation, a prediction that was also grounded in procedural justice theory. To explain forgiveness and reconciliation effects, we turn to the relational model of procedural justice (Tyler & Lind, 1992).

According to Tyler and Lind (1992), fair procedures should strengthen relational bonds among people and group authorities (e.g., employees and their supervisors). Fair procedures convey status to employees by communicating to the employees the following: “If we treat you fairly, we must care about you, or at least respect you.” Tyler (1991) argued that when an employee evaluates the organization favorably, he or she is more motivated to maintain positive social bonds with other employees. To maintain positive bonds, employees must occasionally make sacrifices in the give-and-take of social exchange. Lind (1997) suggested that procedural justice judgments may affect the motivation to make such sacrifices because employees are more likely to sacrifice for a group that is proud to have them than for a group that treats them...
disrespectfully. Forgiveness, by definition, requires the victim to
sacrifice his or her interest in punishing the other party, essentially
canceling a social “debt” owed to the victim (Enright & the Human
Development Study Group, 1991; North, 1987), so it follows that
forgiveness might be more likely to occur in fair organizations.
Similarly, reconciliation often requires one or both parties to
sacrifice some of their interests for the sake of preserving the
relationship (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991;
Van Lange et al., 1997), so it, too, should be more likely in fair
organizations. The following hypotheses tested these predictions:

Hypothesis 6: Favorable perceptions of procedural justice
climate are positively related to forgiveness.

Hypothesis 7: Favorable perceptions of procedural justice
climate are positively related to reconciliation.

Procedural Justice Climate as Moderator of Power and
Status

If the purpose of procedural justice is, in part, to prevent power
abuse—the brute domination of the strong over the weak—then
power and justice may interact to influence the victim’s choice of
coping responses. Consider, as an illustration, the victim’s point of
view. Following an offense, the victim thinks, “How do I ensure
that justice is served and that the offender gets the punishment she
or he deserves? Should I let the organization pursue the matter
(i.e., go through formal grievance procedures) and punish the
offender, or should I just punish the offender myself?” We suggest
that the answer to this question depends on the victim’s relative
hierarchical status and the victim’s perceptions of how fair the
organizational procedures are (i.e., procedural justice climate).

First, if the victim has more status than the offender (e.g., the
victim is the offender’s boss), then the victim does not need the
organization to punish the offender; furthermore, taking personal
revenge can be more effective and efficient than going through
official grievance procedures. However, if the victim has less
status than the offender (e.g., the offender is the victim’s boss),
then rational victims should fear that revenge would invite over-
whelming counterretaliation—and this is when procedural justice
climate matters. Specifically, in fair organizations, the victim will
more likely believe that the organization will punish the offender;
in unfair organizations, the victim will more likely believe that
justice can be achieved only by taking matters into one’s own
hands. Thus, we posited that the default impulse for many em-
ployees is to seek revenge, but the one circumstance that channels
this impulse toward other responses is when the victim has lower
status than the offender and the victim perceives the organization’s
procedures to be fair. The following hypothesis tested this predic-
tion:

Hypothesis 8: Procedural justice climate strengthens the re-
relationship between relative hierarchical status and revenge,
such that when procedural justice climate is high, lower status
victims will seek less revenge than higher status victims; but
when procedural justice climate is low, relative hierarchical
status has no effect on revenge.

We hypothesized that procedural justice climate might also mod-
erate the effect of absolute hierarchical status on forgiveness and
reconciliation. Our rationale for this prediction is that a procedur-
ally just organization establishes a normative context that restrains
the abuse of power (Bies & Tripp, 1995), which revenge by
managers is often judged to be. For example, Tripp and Bies
(1997) found that many managers view revenge as “immoral” and
“unprofessional.” Furthermore, Hogan and Emler (1981) argued
that there is a greater expectation for powerful people to conform
to a social norm prescribing that it is ignoble for them to engage in
petty acts of vengeance because such acts might be perceived as an
abuse of power.

Not only may revenge be viewed as inappropriate for people
with high absolute status but it may also be impractical. Boehm
(1993) has shown that leaders who are perceived as abusing their
power can provoke reprisals and challenges from their subordi-
nates and rivals. However, by showing leniency and restraint,
high-status persons can maintain or even increase their power by
enhancing their own social esteem. The preceding arguments sug-
gest that high-status figures may be expected to forgive or recon-
cile with offenders rather than “waste time” fighting unproductive
battles and might even find that such responses are socially ad-
vantageous. In contrast, the organizational roles of low-status
employees do not carry the same normative expectations to be
lenient toward those who harm them (Hogan & Emler, 1981).
Furthermore, as we argued previously, people with low absolute
hierarchical status may have a strong psychological need to defend
themselves aggressively against personal insults. But because
norms of leniency are more likely to emerge in a procedurally fair
organization (Bies & Tripp, 1995), we posited that any effect of
absolute hierarchical status on responses to offense depends on
employee perceptions of procedural justice climate; thus, the mo-
tivation for high-status employees to forgive and reconcile is
strongest when the organization is procedurally fair.

We expected this to occur because when procedures are fair, the
organization is more likely to be seen as a place where employees
subscribe to norms of humane treatment and believe that wrong-
doers ultimately get what they deserve. Under these conditions,
high-status employees may be more likely to believe that it is
better to resolve conflict through conflict-reducing coping strate-
gies like forgiveness and reconciliation. Second, when procedures
are unfair, the context is one in which deviance and perhaps
vigilantism may go unchecked. As a result, employees may per-
ceive that holding grudges and not reconciling are acceptable
behaviors. These arguments suggest a joint effect of procedural
justice climate and absolute hierarchical status on conflict-
reducing responses to offense; that is, the effect of high absolute
hierarchical status on forgiveness and reconciliation should be
more positive when perceptions of procedural justice climate are
high rather than low. The following hypotheses tested this argu-
ment:

Hypothesis 9: Employees with high absolute hierarchical
status are more willing to forgive when they perceive high
rather than low procedural justice climate; however, employ-
ees with low absolute hierarchical status will not be any more
willing to forgive if procedural justice climate is high than if
it is low.

Hypothesis 10: Employees with high absolute hierarchical
status are more willing to reconcile when they perceive high
rather than low procedural justice climate; however, employees with low absolute hierarchical status will not be any more willing to reconcile if procedural justice climate is high than if it is low.

Method

Sample

Two hundred and fifty-seven public utility employees agreed to complete the questionnaire. One-hundred and seventy-two provided data on all study variables. However, for reasons that will be explained when we describe our measures, we eliminated the data of 43 of these respondents prior to testing our hypotheses. After eliminating these data, we obtained usable data from 129 employees (50% response rate). Sixty-six percent of the respondents were men. Sixty-eight percent were African American; 22% were White; 5% were Asian; and less than 1% was Hispanic. Four percent did not provide information about their race. The average age of the respondents was 40.9 (SD = 7.8) years, and their average job tenure was 11.7 (SD = 7.8) years. In terms of relative hierarchical status, 21% of the offenders had lower status than the respondents, 22% were peers, and 57% had higher status. The public utility is an organization with many hierarchical levels (at least eight levels, not including the municipal government layers above the utility) in a major metropolitan area in the southeastern United States.

Procedure

A survey was administered to employees of a public utility as part of an organizational assessment. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were assured of the anonymity of their responses. Employees who agreed to participate completed the questionnaires on site during company time. All surveys were administered and returned directly to one of the research assistants or to a graduate research assistant.

Measures

We used a critical incident technique to elicit salient experiences of workplace offenses. Respondents were asked to answer the following question:

Think back over the last 6 months as an employee in [the public utility] to recall an incident where another person offended you. Please write a two or three sentence description of the offense below. If you have not been offended by another person within the last 6 months, think about the last time you were offended by another person in [the public utility] or another department [within the city government].

After describing the offense, respondents answered a series of questions about their cognitive and behavioral responses.

The items measuring forgiveness, reconciliation, and revenge were answered by means of a 5-point Likert scale format (1 = not at all accurate, 5 = very accurate) in which respondents were asked how accurately each statement described what they did after the offense.

Forgiveness. We developed four items to measure the degree to which the victim forgave the offender by releasing negative emotions evoked by the offense (e.g., “I let go of the resentment I felt toward them”).

Revenge. Four items from Aquino et al. (2001) measured this construct (e.g., “I did something to make them get what they deserve”).

We performed a principal-components analysis with oblique rotation to assess the dimensionality of the three responses to offense. We used data from all employees who provided usable responses to the items (N = 172) to maximize the ratio of respondents to items. Factor loadings for each item are presented in Table 1.

All of the items showed high (> .50) loadings on their expected factors and low cross-loadings on the remaining factors. Consequently, they were averaged to form three scales. Cronbach’s alpha reliabilities were .81, .81, and .84 for the Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Revenge scales, respectively.

Procedural justice climate. We developed five items to measure respondents’ perceptions of how fairly and consistently each of five organizational procedures was applied by their organization. These included procedures for giving promotions and pay raises, terminating employees, disciplining employees, and evaluating employee performance. Respondents answered on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = very unfair and inconsistent, 10 = very fair and consistent). A factor analysis showed that these items loaded on a single factor and so were averaged to produce a scale score (α = .93).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Forgiveness</th>
<th>Revenge</th>
<th>Reconciliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I made an effort to be more friendly and concerned.</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I tried to make amends.</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I gave them back a new start, a renewed relationship.</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I let go of the negative feelings I had against them.</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I let go of my hate and desire for vengeance.</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I let go of my hurt and pain.</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I let go of the resentment I felt toward them.</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I tried to hurt them.</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I tried to make something bad happen to them.</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I did something to make them get what they deserve.</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>-.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I got even with them.</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eigenvalue: 4.14, 2.39, 2.09
% variance explained: 37.7, 21.8, 9.1

Note. Boldface values indicate that the item loads on the factor.
Victim’s absolute hierarchical status. We measured this construct by asking respondents to indicate the number of levels separating their position from the division manager, the highest ranking person in each division of the public utility (Haleblian & Finkelstein, 1993). According to the organizational chart, the maximum number of levels separating the highest from the lowest position in the public utility was five. However, 10% of the respondents reported being separated by more than five levels from the department division manager. To reduce the influence of outliers, we recoded these responses as “5+” and included them among the set of employees who reported being separated from the department division manager by five levels.

Offender–victim relative hierarchical status. We asked respondents to indicate whether the person who offended them was a “subordinate,” a “supervisor,” a “manager,” an “administrator,” a “peer,” or “other.” As noted earlier, to facilitate the interpretation of the results, we excluded the responses of 43 employees who reported their offender’s status as “other.” A comparison of these employees with those who were retained showed that they did not differ significantly in age, gender, organizational tenure, or the number of levels separating them from the division manager. We combined supervisor, manager, and administrator into a single category representing offenders with higher status than the victim because we assumed that if the victim did not choose “peer” or “subordinate” to describe his or her offender, then the person was likely to have higher relative status. Thus, subordinates and peers constituted the second and third categories, respectively. Relative offender status was operationalized as a continuous variable by coding lower status offenders as −1, peers as 0, and higher status offenders as +1. This coding scheme captures the hierarchical nature of the construct such that lower status offenders presumably have less legitimate power than the victim relative to peers who, in turn, have less power relative to higher status offenders.

Control variables. We controlled for several variables that have been shown to relate to forgiveness, reconciliation, or revenge in past research. We controlled for the victim’s attribution of blame because prior theory and research (e.g., Aquino et al., 2001; Bies et al., 1997; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Weiner, 1995) suggests that blame assignment is one of the most important predictors of revenge. Four items (“I blamed them,” “They wounded me,” “I was victimized,” and “They’re guilty”) from Wade’s (1989) Victimization scale were used to measure this construct. Respondents used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = always) to indicate how frequently they entertained each of these cognitions about the person who offended them. The items were averaged to produce a scale score (α = .78).

We controlled for the victims’ propensity to experience negative emotions in everyday life because this might make them react more strongly to aversive events, which may make them more vengeful (e.g., Skarlicki et al., 1999) and less forgiving. This construct was measured by means of 10 negative affectivity items from Watson, Clark, and Tellegen’s (1988) Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS). The PANAS uses a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = always) for each of the items. The 10 items were averaged to produce a scale score (α = .85).

We controlled for offense severity because severe offenses may elicit a more retributive response (Miller & Vidmar, 1981) and inhibit forgiveness (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991). We measured offense severity with a single item that asked respondents to rate the seriousness of the offense on a 10-point index (1 = not serious, 10 = extremely serious).

Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991) proposed that the forgiveness motive is more likely to strengthen over time as the powerful negative emotions elicited by the offense begin to subside. Consequently, we measured the time since offense with a single item that asked respondents to report how many months had elapsed since the incident they had described.

We controlled for gender because there is some evidence that men hold more favorable attitudes toward revenge than women (Stuckless & Goranson, 1992). There is some evidence that European Americans and African Americans may differ in how they manage conflict (Kochman, 1981). Hence, we controlled for the victim’s ethnicity (1 = White, 0 = non-White).

Last, we included social-desirability response tendency as a control because self-report measures of forgiveness, reconciliation, and revenge are susceptible to impression-management bias. This construct was assessed with a short version of the Crowne–Marlowe Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). The instrument was in a true–false format; consequently, the Kuder–Richardson formula (K-R 20) was used to compute internal consistency reliability (α = .68).

Results
The means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations among the model components are presented in Table 2. Hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the study hypotheses. Three regression models were fitted to predict forgiveness, reconciliation, and revenge. In each model, we entered the control variables in Step 1, followed by the independent variables in Step 2, and the two-way interactions among procedural justice climate perceptions and the status variables in Step 3. The variables forming the interactions were centered to minimize multicollinearity among the interaction terms and their individual components (Aiken & West, 1991). The results of this analysis are shown in Table 3.

Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 stated that relative hierarchical status would be positively related to revenge and negatively related to forgiveness and reconciliation. None of the hypotheses was supported. Hypothesis 4 stated that absolute hierarchical status would be negatively related to revenge. The results supported this hypothesis (B = .09, p < .05). Hypotheses 5, 6, and 7 stated that procedural justice climate perceptions would be negatively related to revenge and positively related to forgiveness and reconciliation, respectively. The results showed that procedural justice climate perceptions were positively related to reconciliation (B = .13, p < .01), which supports Hypothesis 7. However, Hypotheses 5 and 6 were not supported, as procedural justice climate did not significantly predict either forgiveness or revenge.

Hypotheses 8–10 predicted interaction effects between the status variables and procedural justice climate perceptions. Table 3 shows that the two-way interactions explained significant incremental variance in forgiveness (ΔR² = .07, p < .01), reconciliation (ΔR² = .05, p < .05), and revenge (ΔR² = .04, p < .05). We inspected the individual interaction terms to test specific hypotheses. Hypothesis 8 stated that the interaction of procedural justice perceptions and relative hierarchical status would predict revenge. The regression weights in Step 3 showed that the Procedural Justice Climate × Relative Hierarchical Status interaction was significant in the model predicting revenge (B = −.10, p < .05). Figure 1A shows the simple slopes for relationships among relative status and revenge for employees who were one standard deviation above and below the mean in procedural justice climate perceptions. The pattern in Figure 1A partly supports Hypothesis 8.

Hypothesis 9 predicted an interaction of procedural justice climate and absolute hierarchical status on forgiveness. This interaction was significant (B = .10, p < .01). Figure 1B shows the simple slopes for relationships among absolute hierarchical status and forgiveness for employees who were one standard deviation above and below the mean in procedural justice perceptions. The pattern in Figure 1B supports Hypothesis 9.
### Table 2

**Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among the Study Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Revenge</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reconciliation</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Forgiveness</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>-0.32**</td>
<td>-0.51**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Social desirability</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
<td>-0.22*</td>
<td>0.20*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Offense severity</td>
<td>6.88</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Months since offense</td>
<td>8.82</td>
<td>14.53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sex</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Age</td>
<td>41.00</td>
<td>7.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Race</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Blame attribution</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Negative affectivity</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Absolute status</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Relative status</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Procedural justice</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** N = 129. Alpha reliabilities (in parentheses) appear on the diagonal.

* p < .05. ** p < .01.

Supporting Hypothesis 10, the Procedural Justice Climate × Absolute Hierarchical Status interactions were also significant in the models predicting status and power variables affecting the victim’s coping response. Of the seven main effects, two were supported: (a) A more procedurally just climate was related to reconciliation, and (b) the less status on aggressive or antisocial behaviors (e.g., Aquino & Douglass, 2003; Daily & Wilson, 1988; Gilmour, 1996). It also seems that higher levels of social status are related to higher status were sensitive to procedural justice climate as well as status and power variables affect the victim’s choice of coping response. In the case of absolute status, the victim’s coping response is affected by not only the victim’s absolute hierarchical status but also by the perpetrator’s absolute hierarchical status. The findings support the possibility that highly ranked and visible employees are influenced by a norm that prescribes lenient behavior in the aftermath of an offense. The finding is also consistent with the argument made by several theorists (e.g., Baumeister & Schulkin, 1996; Daily & Wilson, 1988; Wellman & Gelfand, 1992). In the case of absolute status, the victim’s coping response is affected by not only the victim’s absolute hierarchical status but also by the perpetrator’s absolute hierarchical status. The findings support the possibility that highly ranked and visible employees are influenced by a norm that prescribes lenient behavior in the aftermath of an offense. The finding is also consistent with the argument made by several theorists (e.g., Baumeister & Schulkin, 1996; Daily & Wilson, 1988; Wellman & Gelfand, 1992).
The patterns of all three interactions support our theoretical explanation that a victim of lower status than the offender (a) pursues revenge as the only means of achieving justice when procedural justice climate is low; (b) refrains from revenge by attempting forgiveness when procedural justice climate is high, because the organization can be counted on to mete out justice; and (c) may seek to reconcile as a way of maintaining a relationship with a more highly positioned organizational member. Future research could further explore the underlying motivations for why people choose certain responses as a function of power, procedural justice, or other variables.

The significant interactions involving the power variables can be compared and contrasted with the findings of Aquino et al. (2001), who also examined these variables. Like Aquino et al. (2001), we found a significant interaction effect on revenge involving procedural justice climate and relative status. Also, their study found to fail a direct relationship between the status variables and reconciliation, which the present study also did not find. However, unlike Aquino et al. (2001), we showed that absolute hierarchical status indirectly affects forgiveness and reconciliation. These apparently discrepant findings may be a result of their model’s focus on the interaction between absolute hierarchical status and blame attribution rather than on the interaction between absolute hierarchical status and procedural justice climate. Note that blame attribution is an individual-level cognition associated with a specific offense, whereas procedural justice climate is a contextual variable outside the offense episode. In sum, our findings are consistent with those of Aquino et al. (2001) because both studies show how power interacts with other variables to predict specific responses to personal offense.

### Limitations

Although all three of our predicted interactions were supported, Study 1 has several limitations that deserve comment. One is that the nature of the constructs being assessed makes them susceptible to self-enhancement biases. We attempted to combat this problem by controlling for social-desirability response tendency in the model test. Moreover, self-report studies of other sensitive topics like workplace deviance suggest that employees are willing to admit engaging in undesirable behavior (Bennett & Robinson, 2000), so it is not clear that respondents were necessarily underreporting their willingness to seek revenge or overreporting their willingness to forgive.

A second limitation is that we only examined three types of responses. Employees can cope with negative events in other ways. For example, they may deny to themselves that an offense ever occurred. They may also ignore the problem or simply allow their anger to dissipate naturally over time. Alternatively, they may sever their relationship with the offender. The purpose of Study 1 was not to conceptually map and explain the myriad responses to perceived wrongdoing at work. Rather, we sought to examine predictors of the proactive coping responses that are most contradictory.

A third limitation is that the use of same-source data for the independent and dependent variables introduces the possibility that common-method bias inflated relationships among these variables. Although we cannot rule out this potential bias, our hypotheses predicted, and the data supported, interaction effects. Together, these facts strengthen the likelihood that the observed relations
were a function of the constructs being studied rather than a methodological artifact.

A fourth limitation is that the cross-sectional nature of the design prevents us from making causal inferences regarding the linkages in the model. However, we note that we did not attempt to test causal relationships but rather to examine whether certain organizational factors interact to predict different responses to wrongdoing.

A fifth limitation is that our sample was drawn from a single organization. Thus, we do not know whether the patterns we found would generalize to other organizations. For instance, that 57% of the offenders had higher status than the respondents may be peculiar to this organization, as one might expect that offenders should be equally distributed across all three status categories (i.e., lower, peer, higher). However, in the workplace bullying literature, those who mistreat others (e.g., bullies) are usually of higher status (Vega & Comer, 2005), and thus this organization may be typical in its distributions of offenders across status. Note that the organization from which our sample was drawn was a public sector organization with well-defined hierarchical levels. It is possible that if we had sampled a flatter organization, or one in which hierarchical levels were less differentiated, our results may have been different. However, we note that our purpose in this study was not to compare the effects of different organizational structures (i.e., flat and undifferentiated vs. tall and highly differentiated) on responses to offense but rather to examine how differences in status and power within an organization might affect these responses. Consequently, the fact that our data came from a single organization should not seriously compromise our ability to answer this question.

A final limitation is that we did not examine how the nature of the offense reported by victims might influence their coping responses. Although we controlled for perceived severity of the offense prior to testing the effects of the status variables and procedural justice, it is possible that qualitative differences in offense types might elicit different reactions from victims. Moreover, there are theoretical reasons to expect reactions to different types of offenses to be moderated by procedural justice climate. We conducted Study 2 to examine this possibility.

Study 2: The Effect of Offense Types and Procedural Justice Climate

Past research has shown that people believe more severe offenses demand more severe responses (Tripp, Bies, & Aquino, 2002). But how might the type of offense, and not just its severity, influence the victim’s preference for a particular response? For example, does it matter if the offense is a personal insult or an act that harms an employee’s chances for promotion? We argue that it does matter, and we believe that justice theory can explain why certain types of offenses might elicit different reactions from victims. Moreover, there are theoretical reasons to expect reactions to different types of offenses to be moderated by procedural justice climate. We conducted Study 2 to examine this possibility.

**Figure 1.** A. Relative Hierarchical Status × Procedural Justice Climate interaction on revenge. B. Absolute Hierarchical Status × Procedural Justice Climate interaction on reconciliation. C. Absolute Hierarchical Status × Procedural Justice Climate interaction on forgiveness. RHS = relative hierarchical status; AHS = absolute hierarchical status; PJC = procedural justice climate.
Study 2 extends Study 1 in three ways. First, Study 2 considers how the qualitative nature of the offense influences the victim’s choice of coping response. Second, Study 2 explores whether procedural justice climate can moderate the relationship between the offense type and the victim’s likely response, just as it moderated the effect of status variables. Finally, Study 2 uses an experimental design that directly manipulates the independent variables, allowing us to draw stronger causal inferences about the relationship between offense types, procedural justice climate, and responses to offense.

Our theoretical arguments for why offense type should influence how people respond to the offender are based on Bies and Tripp’s (2004) finding that there appear to be three broad categories of workplace offense against which victims consider retaliating: (a) goal obstruction; (2) violation of rules, norms, and promises; and (c) status and power derogation. According to Bies and Tripp (2004), goal obstruction occurs when a coworker’s intentional or unintentional actions thwart an employee from reaching a goal. An example is a coworker who wins a promotion, thus preventing another employee’s achievement of that same promotion. In this case, goal obstruction can lead to frustration (Buss, 1961), and it is the experience of being frustrated that can lead people to take revenge (Morrill, 1992).

Employees are also motivated to seek revenge when they see the formal or informal rules of the organization being violated (Bies & Tripp, 1996). An example is when an organizational decision maker changes decision-making rules after the fact to justify a self-serving judgment (Bies & Tripp, 1996). Another example is a formal breach of a contract between an employee and an employer that leads to litigation (Bies & Tyler, 1993). But rule violations can also include breaches of social norms and etiquette. For example, when bosses or coworkers make informal promises and then break them, the victims may be motivated to avenge such wrongs (Bies & Tripp, 1996). The desire to seek revenge can also be evoked when private confidences or secrets are disclosed to others inside or outside the organization—that is, when people feel betrayed by someone they trusted (Bies, 1993). One reason why employees might seek revenge against violators of a group’s formal and informal rules is that if left unchecked, such acts may be viewed as threatening the norms of civic order that make social life tolerable, predictable, and safe.

Finally, attempts to derogate a person’s status or power can motivate revenge (Bies & Tripp, 1996). For example, bosses who are hypercritical, excessively demanding, and perhaps even cruel in their dealings with subordinates can provoke revenge thoughts (Bies & Tripp, 1996). Other examples of derogation include destructive criticism (Baron, 1988), public ridicule intended to embarrass another employee (Morrill, 1992), or false accusations (Bies & Tripp, 1996). Such behaviors can be described as identity threats (Aquino & Douglas, 2003) because they challenge people’s views of themselves as moral entities deserving of fairness, consideration, and respect. Because maintaining a positive self-concept is among the most powerful of all human motives, identity-threatening acts often prompt an aggressive response against their perceived source (Aquino & Douglas, 2003; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996).

To conceptually differentiate these offense types and the responses they are likely to elicit, we proposed that rule violation and derogations are both rooted in the sense of injustice but that goal obstruction is not necessarily interpreted as a justice event. Rule violation is a justice event because it fits within the domain of procedural justice: Consistent application of the rules is one of Leventhal’s (1980) five factors of procedural justice. Thus, by definition, when a rule is violated, it is likely to be interpreted as being a kind of injustice. Status and power derogation, which typically involve acts of dishonesty or disrespect, fit within the domain of interactional justice. Thus, by definition, when someone is derogated, the act may also be interpreted as a justice violation. Goal obstruction, however, does not necessarily fit within the domain of organizational justice. This does not mean, however, that the act of goal obstruction cannot arouse feelings of injustice. For example, there is some research to suggest that “sinister motives” may be attributed to those viewed as responsible for goal obstruction, and that may be the basis for feelings of injustice (Bies et al., 1997). Yet there is also evidence that goal obstruction can be viewed as culturally “acceptable” behavior in the politics of organizational life and thus conveys no injustice overtones (Morrill, 1995).

This distinction between justice-related and non-justice-related offense types is important because revenge and justice are tightly coupled. Indeed, Jacoby (1983) argued that historically, revenge and justice were synonymous. Even today, evidence shows that in response to a workplace injustice, many people believe that workplace revenge is appropriate and even required (Tripp et al., 2002; Solomon, 1990). The aforementioned study by Tripp et al. (2002) found, in general, that subjects judged proportionate acts of revenge (i.e., the amount of harm the victim-cum-avenger causes the offender equals the amount of harm the offender caused the victim) to be morally neutral, but subjects judged disproportionate acts of revenge to be morally bad. Of interest here is that of the two disproportionate acts of revenge—underretaliation and overretaliation—subjects judged underretaliation just as harshly as they judged overretaliation.

What Tripp et al.’s (2002) findings suggest is that employees do not like justice violations to go unpunished. Victims, however, may not be so strongly motivated to seek revenge against goal-obstruction offenses because they do not necessarily construe these offenses to be injustice events, although victims may experience them as frustrating. We do not suggest that goal-obstruction offenses will never lead to revenge but rather that they will be less likely to motivate revenge than will justice-related events like rule violation or derogation.

On the basis of the preceding arguments, we hypothesized that offenses interpreted as being justice events—rule violations and derogations—are more likely than goal-obstruction offenses to provoke revenge. By extension, we expect people to be less conciliatory toward and more motivated to avoid an offender who commits a justice-related than a goal-obstruction offense. The following hypotheses tested the arguments just presented:

**Hypothesis 1:** Derogation and rule violation are more likely than goal obstruction to motivate revenge.

**Hypothesis 2:** Derogation and rule violation are more likely than goal obstruction to motivate avoidance.

**Hypothesis 3:** Derogation and rule violation are less likely than goal obstruction to motivate reconciliation.
As in Study 1, we expected the proposed main effects to be moderated by procedural justice climate. Specifically, we predicted that a low procedural justice climate would strengthen the main effects of offense type on coping responses. The rationale follows the theoretical arguments presented in Study 1. Namely, when employees see procedures as fair, they are more likely to believe that the organization will protect their interests over time, in part by punishing those who violate justice norms. As a result, victims will refrain from seeking personal revenge to mete out justice, believing that the organization will mete out justice for them. However, for harms that do not violate justice norms, the justice climate is irrelevant: Afterall, why would an organization, even a fair organization, be expected to punish an employee for a non-justice-related event? With no expectation for management to punish a goal obstruction offense—in a fair or an unfair organization—victims who wish such punishment will have to do it themselves. As such, the effect of offense type on responses—especially whether rule violation and derogation lead to responses that are more negative than those associated with goal obstruction—depends on procedural justice climate. Specifically, we predicted that when procedures are fair, victims will not necessarily prefer a negative response as a function of whether the offense is a justice violation or a goal obstruction; however, when procedures are unfair, then justice violations will elicit more negative (revenge and avoidance) and less positive (reconciliation) interpersonal responses than will goal obstruction (i.e., the effect of offense types on interpersonal responses proposed in Hypotheses 1–3 should occur). The following hypotheses tested these predictions:

Hypothesis 4: When procedures are perceived as unfair, derogation and rule violation are more likely than goal obstruction to motivate revenge, but when procedures are perceived as fair, no differences in revenge should occur among the offense types.

Hypothesis 5: When procedures are perceived as unfair, derogation and rule violation are more likely than goal obstruction to motivate avoidance, but when procedures are perceived as fair, no differences in avoidance should occur among the offense types.

Hypothesis 6: When procedures are perceived as unfair, derogation and rule violation are less likely than goal obstruction to motivate reconciliation, but when procedures are perceived as fair, no differences in reconciliation should occur among the offense types.

Note that the procedural justice rationale for Hypotheses 4–6 sounds very similar to the procedural justice rationale for Hypotheses 1–3. However, there is an important distinction. For the main effects of offense type on responses detailed in Hypotheses 1–3, injustice was conceptualized as a specific act of injustice that triggers victims to even consider a response. However, for the interaction effects proposed in Hypotheses 4–6, injustice is conceptualized as the climate that surrounds the specific act of offense and informs the response consideration process already begun—that is, the climate informs victims that for any offense that deserves punishment, the organization will not deliver that punishment (and victims will have to punish offenders themselves through revenge or avoidance).

Method

Sample

One-hundred and forty-eight MBA students from two mid-Atlantic universities completed the questionnaire for course extra credit. Fifty-seven percent were men. They averaged 29.1 (SD = 6.2) years of age and 7.7 (SD = 7.1) years of work experience.

Procedure

Respondents were asked to read a half-page story about a workplace conflict between two coworkers. The story included information about the type of offense and the procedural justice climate. After reading the story, respondents then answered an 85-item questionnaire, which measured their perceptions of the conflict, what they thought the victim (Val) should do, and demographic information.

Independent Variables

The independent variables were manipulated by changing information in the conflict story. The stock conflict story read as follows:

Pat and Val are engineers in the engineering department at AudioBit, a firm of 500 employees that produces audio cards for personal computers. AudioBit has been in business for 10 years now, and Pat and Val have worked there for the last 5 years. AudioBit’s managers have earned a reputation not only for delivering high-quality products but also for procedural justice climate manipulation information here.

Last week, Pat and Val discussed their mutual interest in working on a highly desired assignment that involves designing a new compression algorithm. However, only one more employee was needed for and would get to work on the assignment. Val desperately wanted this assignment.

The project manager would interview a small, select group of people [type of offense manipulation information here]. In the end, a third employee, Kelly, was awarded the assignment.

Procedural justice climate. To manipulate the level of procedural justice climate, we adapted Naumann and Bennett’s (2000) measures for Visibility of Supervisors in Demonstrating Procedural Justice and Procedural Justice Climate scales, which in turn were based on Leventhal’s (1980) five-factor model of procedural justice and Moorman’s (1991) measure of procedural justice. Thus, the following information was added regarding the amount of voice, rule consistency, information accuracy, and correctability at the employees’ company:

High Procedural Justice Climate Condition . . . their good treatment of employees. Employees are treated with high respect, as they are involved in upper-level decision making. In fact, as Pat and Val have witnessed on numerous occasions, their manager has always considered their views before making major decisions, has always applied the rules consistently across employees, and makes sure to base decisions on accurate information. Even then, if employees disapprove of a decision, their manager has shown a willingness to reconsider.

Low Procedural Justice Climate Condition . . . their poor treatment of employees. Employees are treated with low respect, as they are never included in upper-level decision making. In...
fact, as Pat and Val have witnessed on numerous occasions, their manager rarely considers their views before making major decisions, frequently applies rules inconsistently across employees, and never ensures that decisions are based on accurate information. Moreover, if employees disapprove of a decision, their manager has not been willing to reconsider.

Type of offense. To manipulate type of offense, we added the following information regarding what one employee, Pat, did to offend and potentially provoke the victim, Val. Three types of offense were provided: goal obstruction, rule violation, and derogation.

Goal-Obstruction Offense Condition
Pat discovered that the project manager needed to make a decision quickly and had time to interview only a couple more employees. Pat signed up for an interview but neglected to mention to Val about the last-remaining interview slots.

Rule-Violation Offense Condition
The formal procedure for such assignments is that an applicant’s supervising manager is supposed to nominate the applicant to the assistant project manager. The assistant project manager then reviews the applicant’s file, and if the applicant looks qualified, sets up an interview between the applicant and the lead project manager. Val followed the procedures. Pat, on the other hand, ignored the procedures by using a personal friendship with the lead project manager’s secretary to get on the interview schedule. Val never got an interview.

Derogation Offense Condition
Next, when Val met with the project manager, Val spoke only of Val’s qualifications. However, when Pat met with the project manager, Pat not only spoke of Pat’s qualifications but also spent 15 minutes arguing why Val was not qualified, including how, in Pat’s opinion, Val had not really contributed to previous projects and how Val made many errors that Pat had to correct.

Responses to offense. We measured how participants were likely to respond to each of the three offense types by asking them to indicate how they thought Val should respond. Revenge was assessed with two items: “Val should try to make something bad happen to Pat” and “Val should get even with Pat.” Reconciliation was assessed with three items: “Val should try to make amends with Pat,” “Val should make an effort to be friendlier to Pat,” and “Val should give Pat a new start, a renewed relationship.” Avoidance was assessed with three items: “Val should withdraw from Pat,” “Val should cut off any relationship with Pat,” and “Val should avoid Pat.” All items were assessed with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 5 = absolutely). A principal-components analysis with varimax rotation showed that these items loaded on the expected factors. Thus, items assessing whether the offenses would be perceived as more harmful than others, irrespective of who caused it or how, to be roughly similar among the three conditions. However, goal obstruction had less perceived severity of harm (M = 5.4) than did either rule violation (M = 6.8) or derogation (M = 6.5); overall, F(2, 133) = 5.1, p < .01, η² = .04.

Another item read, “Pat hurt Val’s reputation.” We expected the strongest agreement with this item to occur in the derogation condition. A one-way ANOVA with planned contrasts showed that derogation (M = 3.9) was significantly higher, t(144) = 10.8, p < .01, η² = .04, than both goal obstruction (M = 1.7) and rule violation (M = 2.4).

For the item “Pat did not follow the rules,” we expected the strongest agreement with this item to occur in the rule-violation condition. A one-way ANOVA with planned contrasts showed that rule violation (M = 4.4) was significantly higher, t(142) = 9.2, p < .01, η² = .04, than both goal obstruction (M = 2.1) and derogation (M = 3.1).

Hypothesis Tests
We used an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to test Hypotheses 1–6. Three models were fitted: one predicting each of the three interpersonal responses. All models controlled for the perceived harmfulness of the offense. The results of the ANCOVA are presented in Table 4.

Hypotheses 1–3 stated that derogation and rule violation—the justice offenses—are more likely than goal obstruction to motivate revenge and avoidance and are less likely to motivate reconciliation. Table 4 shows that these hypotheses were not supported. Hypotheses 4–6 posited interaction effects. Specifically, Hypotheses 4–6 stated that when the procedural justice climate is perceived as being unfair, it will encourage revenge and avoidance and discourage reconciliation for rule-violation and derogation offenses but not for goal-obstruction offenses; however, these differences will not occur when the procedural justice climate is perceived as being fair. Significant Procedural Justice × Offense-Type interactions in the models predicting revenge, F(1, 131) =
justice climate was low, participants were more inclined to pursue revenge against justice violations ($M = 1.9$) than against goal obstructions ($M = 1.4$), $t(75) = 1.73, p < .05$; however, when procedural justice climate was high, there was no difference in revenge across offense types ($Ms = 1.5$ for justice violations and 1.8 for goal obstruction), $t(69) = 1.48$ (ns). The pattern for avoidance was similar: In a climate perceived as being low in procedural justice, participants were inclined to avoid the offender more in the case of justice violations ($M = 2.8$) than in the case of goal obstruction ($M = 2.4$), $t(74) = 2.18, p < .05$; however, in a climate perceived as being high in procedural justice, avoidance did not vary across offense types ($Ms = 2.5$ for justice violations and 2.8 for goal obstruction), $t(68) = 1.27$ (ns).

### Additional Planned Analyses

The interaction hypotheses were predicated on the assumption that people will perceive a procedurally just climate as an environment in which offenders will likely be punished by authorities, whereas a procedurally unjust climate will be perceived as one in which offenders will not be punished. We tested this perception in our sample by examining several items. First, we composed a scale out of four items that asked whether management punishes wrongdoers (e.g., “At Audiobit, an employee who misbehaves can expect to be punished by management”). The four items formed a reliable Likelihood of Punishment scale ($\alpha = .91$). This scale strongly correlated with the procedural justice manipulation ($r = .90, p < .01$).

The interaction hypotheses were also predicated on the assumption that when procedural justice climate is high, rule-violation and derogation offenses are more likely than goal-obstruction offenses to be punished; no such difference across offense types would occur when procedural justice climate is low. The data confirmed this assumption. When procedural justice climate was high, a one-way ANOVA with planned contrasts showed that rule violation ($M = 4.0$) and derogation ($M = 3.9$) were significantly higher, $t(68) = 2.7, p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .10$, in likelihood of punishment than was goal obstruction ($M = 3.5$). Yet when procedural justice climate was low, a one-way ANOVA with planned contrasts showed no differences among the means ($Ms = 2.5$ for goal obstruction and 2.6 for both rule violation and status derogation), $t(144) = 0.8$ (ns).
Discussion

The results suggest that the type of offense does influence whether victims are inclined to seek revenge against offenders and to avoid offenders. We found that in terms of Bies and Tripp’s (2004) typology of offenses (goal obstruction, rule violation, and status derogation), victims are more inclined to avenge rule-violation or derogation offenses than goal obstruction offenses, but only when victims perceive that the procedural justice climate is unfair. When the climate is fair, they are no more likely to respond to any one of the offenses. We found the same pattern for the victim’s inclination to avoid a harm-doer following an offense. Moreover, we predicted and found evidence that this effect occurs because people perceive rule violations and derogations, but not goal obstructions, to be violations of justice norms that will invite punishment from management, but only when the procedural justice climate is fair.

General Discussion

The results from Studies 1 and 2 suggest that victims of workplace offenses respond to a number of factors in choosing a coping response. These factors include the procedural justice climate of the organization, the relative power between the victim and the offender, the absolute organizational status of the victim, and whether the offense is an act of injustice. In Study 1, we found that the effect of power of the victim depends on the procedural justice climate. In Study 2, we found that procedural justice climate again moderates the effect of other variables on coping responses to workplace offenses. In particular, in deciding whether to seek revenge against or to avoid an offender, the victim assesses whether an offense is a violation of justice norms, and if so, then a procedurally fair climate inhibits revenge and avoidance. Across both studies, the clearest effect is that of procedural justice climate.

Why do the effects of the power, status, and offense-type variables all depend on the procedural justice climate? We theorized, and our evidence supports, that before victims choose a response to a workplace offense, they consider the procedural justice climate. The heart of our theory is that coping responses are much about vigilante justice—that is, when do victims mete out justice themselves, and when do victims let the organization mete out justice? In short, when victims have a power advantage over their offenders or when victims believe the organization will not punish the offenders, then victims will “take the law into their hands” by punishing their offenders themselves. Conversely, when victims are disadvantaged with respect to their offenders and when victims believe the organization really will punish the offenders, then victims will “let the law handle it,” and they will be more likely to forgive or reconcile, knowing that justice has been served. As such, a fair procedural justice climate is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to get the lowest levels of revenge and avoidance and the highest levels of reconciliation.

These findings reinforce the view that power and justice are intertwined: One cannot really understand justice dynamics without understanding power dynamics and vice versa, because the concern for justice acts as a check on the use of power (Bies & Tripp, 1995). Indeed, as Tyler (1990) argued in his book Why People Obey the Law, citizens will not comply with the law unless they perceive it and the lawmakers as legitimate, and they will not perceive legitimacy unless they also perceive justice; hence, one cannot wield legitimate power without being perceived as just.

These findings are consistent not only with the instrumental and interpersonal models of justice but also with deontic justice (Cropanzano, Goldman, & Folger, 2003). Cropanzano et al. argued that although reactions to offense often reflect instrumental and interpersonal concerns of the victim—that is, victims seek to improve their work outcomes and protect their social standing—such concerns alone cannot explain all reactions to offense. Some victims may be concerned with acting on or reinforcing the moral principles, whatever the personal cost. Consistent with deontic reasoning, our research suggests that victims are concerned with pursuing justice for justice’s sake—that is, offenders get the punishments they deserve. But not at any cost to oneself. Rather, victims appear to consider social norms as well as the practicalities of protecting themselves from counterretaliation.

Finally, these findings emphasize another role for procedural justice: Not only can a procedural injustice provoke or trigger revenge, as it did in the studies by Skarlicki and colleagues (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Skarlicki et al., 1999), but procedural justice climate can also channel the desire for revenge into less revenge and into more forgiveness and reconciliation. In our study, procedural injustice was viewed as a climate that surrounds the conflict episode, meaning that procedural injustice was theorized as possibly amplifying a conflict into vengeance, but it does not start the conflict.

Managerial Implications

The results of this study suggest clear prescriptions for managers. We presume that managers would rather have their employees forgive and reconcile with others than seek personal vengeance or avoid each other; personal vengeance often escalates out of control, creating unproductive and chaotic conflicts, and avoidance can sever functioning relationships. Thus, managers should create environments that encourage forgiveness and reconciliation instead of revenge and avoidance. To this end, managers should strive to create a procedurally just climate. This is important not only because offenses may be fewer or less severe in a procedurally just organization but also because once offenses occur, victims of offenses will more likely pursue formal grievance mechanisms, such as a boss’s open door or an organizational ombudsman. Receiving justice for the offense through formal mechanisms, the victim can then get over the offense, perhaps by forgiving the offender, and get on with work rather than obsess over ways to get even. Of course, not all victims will respond equally to a procedurally just climate. Those who are highly placed in the organization will respond more favorably than will those who are lowly placed. Also, all other things being equal, those victims who have more power than their offenders will be less influenced by the procedurally just climate.

Conclusion

Each day in organizations, people experience harm and wrongdoing. Our findings suggest that how people respond to such experiences is not just a function of individual factors or traits; rather, environmental variables such as power and procedural justice climate are critical in shaping individual responses to harm.
and wrongdoing. These findings not only suggest new and important directions for future justice research but also underscore the need for managerial efforts to “reengineer” their organizations to include a procedurally just climate.

References


Received November 19, 2002
Revision received May 2, 2005
Accepted June 13, 2005