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"Equality Theory" as a Counterbalance to Equity Theory in Human Resource Management

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Abstract This conceptual paper revisits the concept of equality as a base of distributive justice and contends that it is underspecified, both theoretically and in terms of its ethical and pragmatic application to human resource management (HRM) within organizations. Prior organizational literature focuses primarily upon distributive equality of remunerative outcomes within small groups and implicitly employs an equity-based conception of inputs to define equality. In contrast, through exposition of the philosophical roots of equality principles, we reconceptualize inputs as de facto equal and consider the systemic application of distributive equality in the form of status leveling practices. Ethical ramifications of distributive equality so viewed are explored. We conclude by arguing that, to implicitly insert a stronger ethics focus into the study and practice of HRM, perhaps there should be "equality theory" competing with equity theory for recognition in managerial and scholarly discourse.

Keywords Distributive equality · Distributive justice · Status leveling · Egalitarian

Introduction

Distributive justice is broadly defined as the fair distribution of resources (Greenberg and Colquitt 2005). One common subtype of distributive justice, that is, one basis for distributing resources, is equity. Equity-based justice is rooted in the sense of proportion—the sense that the outcomes individuals receive (remuneration, a corner office, or any other valued outcome) should be awarded in proportion to their inputs (how hard they work, how productive they are, etc.). Equity is a central base of distributive justice in organizations. Indeed, based on the amount of literature it has generated, it would appear to comprise the preeminent base.

Yet the wider literature on distributive justice recognizes that, in addition to equity, equality is also a fundamental base of distributive justice (e.g., Rawls 1971, 2001; Fraser and Honneth 2003; Fraser 2008). In contrast to equity, under equality distribution rules, all outcomes are equal. Here, in stark contrast to equity principles, individuals receive equivalent outcomes, presumably without regard to their inputs. For example, if all members of a team receive an equivalent reward, such instances distributive equality. But despite the fact that equality is a major distributive basis within the broader literature on distributive justice, within the organizational literature there is scant research on, or recognition of, equality as a basis for distributing valued outcomes or resources.

Now, one might surmise that equality is little applied (or researched) in organizational settings because, after all, organizations (and in particular business organizations) are ultimately meritocratic systems. That is, because organizations operate within market constraints, they focus upon equity-based outcomes for sound economic reason. Yet to the contrary, this conceptual paper takes issue with the above assumption, suggesting that there are many potential venues for distributive equality in organizations. This paper further ventures that the dearth of research on distributive equality in organizational settings derives from the fact that

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the meaning of distributive equality—as it exists in the relatively delimited literature on the subject—has been inadequately, and quite poorly, specified.

Thus, this paper offers a more fully specified definition of equality vis a vis its role as a base of distributive justice in organizations. Prior treatments take a rather narrow, ultimately an economic/utilitarian view of human inputs into work. That is, even when individuals are rewarded equally, there is an implicit assumption that they nevertheless differ in terms of what they bring to the table relative to adding value to organizations (how hard they work, level of skill or training, education, and so on). In contrast, through an exposition of the philosophical roots of equality principles emanating from Enlightenment philosophy, we herein reconceptualize equality to signify that all inputs are de facto equal. That is, one's existential membership in a society, an organization, or group ultimately comprises one vital root conceptualization for distributive equality.

Beyond this, the paper outlines how distributive equality based on existential membership might actually be practiced within organizations. Here we critically examine how a number of existing organizational practices represent heretofore unexamined instances of distributive equality. Third and finally, we explore the ethical dimensions of distributive equality, and organizational responsibilities for engaging in such distributive practices in today's global environment. The overarching goal of this paper is to influence human resource management (HRM) discourse, which is ultimately thought to be a key influence of values and practices in the workplace (Jacques 1999).

To contextualize the overall thrust of this paper, the reconceptualization presented herein—that members' very existence as human beings may privilege them, to a degree, to receive equivalent (or less unequal) outcomes—constitutes quite a radical departure from prior treatments of distributive equality. This recentering and reengagement of the concept of distributive justice, and of how work organizations might better practice and implement justice, is especially timely given world events today. Consider that, as a society, we have become ever more efficient at producing *things*—all the material goods and resources that we need to sustain us in life. And yet paradoxically, the more we are productive, the more the good life seems to continually elude our grasp. For example, while millions remain unemployed, enduring an enforced and stressful "leisure," at the same time those who are employed find themselves working longer hours than ever (Schor 1993, 2010), and indeed yearning for greater leisure time.

In fact, many of the paradoxes of our age relate to inequalities of distribution. For example, there are today approximately 18.5 million vacant homes in the US, while at the same time there are 3.5 million homeless (National Coalition for the Homeless 2009). Moreover, witness the vast distributive inequalities within organizations (CEO pay), and within society generally (the 1 vs. 99 %). Such inequalities have increasingly become issues of great concern in the global culture, and have particularly escalated within the United States in terms of actual disparities and disquiet (Hacker and Pierson 2010). Some would argue that we have as a civilization—indeed as a planet—reached a tipping point, such that the primary task before us is not one of production, but rather of *distribution* (Eisenstein 2011; Maynard and Mehrtens 1996; Rifkin 2004, 2009; Zuboff and Maxim 2004). In this context, a close re-examination of the meaning of distributive equality is of value.

Even further, we appear to have arrived at an era in world history where many other "time honored" forms of inequality are being tested. Autocratic leadership is giving way to nascent democratic movements around the globe. Such occurred over a decade ago across Eastern Europe and currently appears to be unfolding within the Middle East, and perhaps spreading or being augmented in countries such as Russia, China, and India in the future. As political systems become more democratic, organizations within these systems will need to as well. The call for organizational democracy is in fact a growing element of both research and practice, justified by many as an economic business imperative for today's knowledge-based companies (see Johnson 2006 for an overview) and as an ethical duty for companies to share power in the employment relationship by social justice standards (Van Buren and Greenwood 2008). Indeed justice norms can serve to regulate exchange relationships that are not otherwise controlled by hierarchies, market constraints, or power processes (Eckhoff 1974; Williamson 1975). Yet while research on organizational democracy focuses on worker participation and governance issues, distributive equality clearly comprises a fundamental building block for democracy theorists to consider. Here again, the idea, and re-examination, of distributive equality offers us value.

The Myopias of Prior Organizational Research on Distributive Equality

While a number of potential distributive standards exist (e.g., equity, equality, need, and others; Sabbagh et al. 1994), research has almost exclusively focused upon equity as a standard of fairness (Adams 1965; Greenberg 1990; Meindl 1989; Walster et al. 1978). Equity is generally deemed useful for distributing valued outcomes in the arena of economic activity (i.e., pay), where the emphasis is one of both motivating and rewarding individual achievement (Chen 1995; Deutsch 1985, 1986). As noted, distributive equality generally entails that outcomes be equivalent. Equality is typically deemed a superior basis for achieving distributive justice when the overarching goal is one of fostering or maintaining good interpersonal relations, attaining a sense of community, or achieving social integration (Deutsch 1985, 1986).

The existing but relatively small body of research on distributive equality largely supports the above declared link between equality of distribution and socially integrative outcomes. For example, Lerner (1974) found that when partnership and team membership were stressed subjects tended to ignore differential input and opted to adopt an equality standard in distributing rewards. Leventhal et al. (1972) found that allocators shifted toward the equality principle in allocating group rewards when they were instructed to minimize interpersonal conflicts. Marin's (1981) subjects perceived an equality rule as more likely than equity to promote a friendly atmosphere and good relations. Leung and Park (1986) found that when the goal of a situation was that of enhancing friendship versus improving productivity, equity was deemed less fair, equality more so. Meindl (1989) found equality to be managers' preferred distribution principle when solidarity was the goal, equity when productivity was emphasized. For similar studies (with like findings), see Bamberger and Levi (2009), Chen (1995), Colquitt and Jackson (2006), and Mannix et al. (1995).

Yet the above cited research on equality distribution almost exclusively focuses on remunerative distribution within small groups (Bamberger and Levi 2009; Colquitt and Jackson 2006; Deutsch 1985, 1986; Lerner 1974; Leung and Park 1986; Leventhal et al. 1972; Mannix et al. 1995; Marin 1981; Meindl 1989), and this methodological provenance tilting toward small groups inadvertently narrows our field of vision relative to the broader organizational potentials of distributive equality. It does so in two specific ways. One issue is that in small groups members are generally *equal* in status. This exists in stark contrast to formal organizations broadly conceived, were most members are decidedly not equal in status. Organizations are, de facto, hierarchic systems. The second issue has to do with the literature's almost exclusive focus on *remuneration*. While in this paper, we do explore remuneration as one potential organizational venue for enacting greater distributive equality, here again, the remunerative focus of prior research may inadvertently narrow our field of vision relative to potential distributive venues. For as we explore herein, within organizations—as cultural, social, and technical systems broadly conceived—there exist a good number of valued outcomes other than simply remunerative ones.

Moreover, and most germane to the present paper, the extant literature also contains a fundamental limitation emanating from our received conceptualizations of distributive equality. This limitation is located in the basic logic—the implicit background assumptions—of prior research. Specifically, as a justificative argument for distribution based on an equality standard, the research literature tends to state that all inputs are "assumed" to be equal, "despite differential inputs." For example, as Sheppard (among many others) puts it: distributive equality is taken to mean that members are rewarded equally "regardless of inputs" (Sheppard et al. 1992).

The Conceptualization of Inputs under Distributive Equality

To understand why this conception of equality is problematic, note that if one closely examines the notion of inputs, one can in fact envision three distinct treatments of inputs that might give rise to an equality of distribution. One such treatment suggests that we distribute outcomes based on an equality standard when we are simply *unable* to discern differential inputs. For example, in the context of small group or team projects, it can be notoriously difficult to accurately measure or assess each individual's unique contribution. This is particularly the case due to the highly interdependent nature of the work (and particularly knowledge work) in many contemporary organic contexts it can be virtually impossible to separately identify individual contributions. In such an event, an organization (or manager) may have little choice but to lump all members' inputs as one and the same, and consequently to reward all, to at least some degree, equally.

Yet a second potential treatment of inputs exists. Here consider a context wherein an organization is in fact able to discern or to measure differential inputs, yet chooses to ignore these differential inputs (or to downplay them) in the interest of creating a motivated harmony (i.e., to foster a sense of community and solidarity—per the logic cited above). In other words, even to the extent, an organization is capable of distinguishing distinctive individual contributions, it might make an explicit choice not to focus on such, the thinking being that vesting all members with common accountability (and thus equal outcomes) will engender greater teamwork, cooperativeness—a common sense of investiture in work processes and outcomes.

Neither of these two treatments of inputs is defective; each offers an important contribution. However, we suggest that the two views above contain the seeds of a social construction and *definition of the meaning of equality that is an equality perceived through the lens of equity-based conceptualization*. For if we deconstruct what is going on, the tacit logic is that we presumptively know that team member inputs are in fact not equal (either because we cannot measure them or because we choose not to measure them), but that in order to maximize team identification, cohesion and harmony we "imagine," "assume" or otherwise treat inputs "as if" they are equal. While inputs are of course fundamental to equity-based distribution schemes, there appears to be an implicit, unspoken assumption that under distributive equality inputs really do not matter. (i.e., that since inputs will always vary to some degree, what principally defines an equality of distribution is simply one's choice of equality as a reward structure.)

Taking issue with this unspoken assumption, we suggest that inputs matter very much and are most certainly *not* irrelevant. For there exists a third logical possibility for conceptualizing inputs within distributive equality. This entails that all inputs are de facto equal. Accordingly, while one can always envision some sort of unequal distribution of individual differences or abilities relative to one's potential contributions to a company; at a fundamental level, it can certainly be said that all human beings have and merit a fundamental sense of respect and of self-worth. Translated into the input/outcome terminology of equity theory, an individual's basic humanity comprises an input in and of itself (and by definition all such inputs are equivalent). We do not have to "pretend" or "assume" that inputs are equal. They are. In short: equality-based distributive decisions can be theoretically grounded in the notion of equal contributions in an *existential* sense—not simply in the sense of measurement.[1]

This is in some ways a simple, some might say a simplistic, distinction. Yet this distinction introduces a conceptual shift that has the potential to profoundly influence our understanding of claims to distributive equality, as well as the potential applications of such.

The Idea of Existential Equality

To flesh out this construal of equality of inputs, we draw on notions of equality rooted in Enlightenment philosophy. For example, the belief that "all [people] are created equal"—that all enjoy a natural equality—is a central tenet of Western culture. The fundamental "invention" of enlightenment philosophy was to put all individuals, for the first time in Western History (for even the Greeks had slaves), on one and the same footing as existentially equal beings. Within the context of historicultural thought (i.e., the history of humankind's representations of self in relation to society), this represents a rather break from the past. Such is the essential thesis of Rousseau's famous discourse on the origin of inequality among people (Rousseau 1775/1992). It is the message conveyed by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence with the well-known words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [people] are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness…." These are what John Locke deemed "natural rights" (also called moral rights or unalienable rights), namely rights that were not contingent upon the laws, customs, or beliefs of a particular society or polity (Locke 1689/2010).[2]

Equality, in an existential sense, is a profound concept, and potentially wide-reaching in terms of its diverse possible readings and implications. Within an organizational arena, it is not here implied that individuals must always enjoy the very same equalities that they enjoy in the larger society. Our contention is simply that in the workplace individuals, by virtue of their existence—and hence by their simple membership in an organization, may likely perceive that they are privileged with certain basic modes of treatment as individuals. Overall, we are not making claims as to just how *far* organizations will or must travel in terms of an equality of distribution. Ultimately, this becomes both a pragmatic question (in terms of organizations' motives for implementing greater distributive equality relative to their desire to engage in human resource practices that may be more competitive in the marketplace), and also an ethical question (in terms of organizations' potential *obligations* to practice greater distributive equality due to its intrinsic potential to make workplaces more just). Here we are merely making the limited claim that, to the degree one proposes to study distributive equality within an organizational context, that existential equality is one very proper, yet heretofore neglected, root conceptualization. To further flesh out how this may operate in practice, we will next consider specific ways an existential form of distributive equality resides or may be extended within organizations.

Existential Distributive Equality in Organizational Practice

Up to this point, we have defined existential distributive equality as a general mode of treatment, without specifically considering what might be distributed in such a manner. The "equality of what" question has various societal level interpretations, including equality of basic liberties and opportunity (Rawls 1971, 2001), equality of capabilities (Sen 1999), and equality of resources (Dworkin 2000). There has been some prescriptive translation of

[1] Our use of the rather mechanistic "inputs" represents an attempt to be consistent with wider justice literature. Yet, construing "inputs" as existential equality clearly enters into an ethical dimension.

[2] "Enlightenment Philosophy" casts a broad net. While we use Enlightenment philosophy to capture a significant turning point in the history of ideas, it should be noted that Rousseau, Jefferson, and Locke do not hold precisely equivalent views. Moreover, the concept of human equality precedes the Enlightenment in that it is encountered in all major religious traditions.

these philosophical interpretations to the workplace (e.g., Lindblom's 2011, workplace interpretation of Rawls; Gagnon and Cornelius' 2000, workplace interpretation of Sen). However, if we apply a descriptive rather prescriptive lens, it seems that organizations are already implementing existential distributive equality, to some degree, and in a fashion compatible with the interpretation of existential equality of membership.

Specifically, we suggest that organizations currently engage in a substantial degree of distributive equality relative to what is referred to in the literature as either "status leveling" (Lawler 2000, 2006; Morand 2010; Walton 1985) or "symbolic egalitarianism" (Pfeffer 1994, 1998). These two phrases are widely used in the literature on high-involvement/high-performance organizations to reference organizations' attempts to diminish or blur status distinctions. Specific practices here include the elimination of differential office and parking space, of segregated cafeteria and washroom facilities, of differential dress codes, differential perquisites, and so forth. These practices have *never* been described in terms of distributive equality, yet we contend they perfectly instance such.

Here recall our earlier contention to the effect that the extant literature too narrowly focuses on remunerative distribution, and only within small equal-status groups at that. If one attempts to go beyond the small group focus, toward organizations as social systems broadly conceived, and beyond a narrow focus on remuneration, the logical focus of inquiry would be organizational status systems. That is, any venturing into greater distributive equality within organizations is necessarily predicated on the existence of distributive inequalities, and the primary nexus of distributive inequality in organizations is none other than their status systems.

By organizational status, we refer here to individuals' formal positions within the organizational hierarchy. But at the same time, status *systems* also refer to everything that—again distributively speaking—goes with said positions—be this a particular form of remuneration, a corner office, a mahogany desk, or so on. The intention of so-called status leveling, or symbolic egalitarianism, is not to entirely eliminate status, but to diminish, to mitigate, or to blur these forms of inequality.[3]

This conceptualization of status leveling comports with Fraser's (Fraser 1997, 2001, 2008; Fraser and Honneth 2003) well-developed body of work on the philosophy of social justice, in which she utilizes a status-equality model as a framework for conceptualizing social justice. Fraser notes that theories of distributive justice typically focus upon the socio-economic realm, and as such are interpreted primarily in terms of the distribution (or redistribution) of material goods or resources. But Fraser contends that alongside these more standard redistributive claims, there also lay very important and equally valid claims for "recognition" that must be considered in any serious attempt to achieve justice. By "recognition" Fraser refers to the cultural or symbolic dimension of inequality, namely: "social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication" (1997, p. 15). Patterns of "misrecognition" in these domains interfere with appreciation of "our common humanity," with ability to come together and interact "as social peers" (Fraser 2001, p. 29). Indeed Fraser avers that in practice *economic injustice and cultural injustice are inseparable*: "Even the most material economic institutions have a constitutive, irreducible cultural dimension; they are shot through with significations and norms…. Economic injustice and cultural injustice are usually interimbricated so as to reinforce each other dialectically" (1997, p. 15).

The so-called status leveling practices employed by organizations clearly comport with Fraser's model of justice in that they often interpenetrate both material and symbolic spheres of organizational life. For just one example, organizational status leveling practices include such things as the elimination of differential washrooms for differential classes of employees. No doubt, a washroom is a material resource, but it is also symbolic. That is, segregated washrooms are not merely separate objects but are also unequal in the sense of recognition. Compare the experience of a clean and well-appointed executive washroom with a dirty, smelly restroom "reserved" exclusively for "workers." These examples the very apportionment of esteem that Fraser refers to as "recognition." Below consider a number of the specific spheres within which organizations' practice of status leveling unfolds.

Steps Toward Existential Equality in Organizations

Space and Access Thereto

Within traditional organizations, hierarchical status played a key role in the design of physical space, as well as rights of personnel to access certain artifacts, areas or services. Consider how "mahogany row" is pejoratively used by lower echelon members in some organizations to refer to the more luxuriant desks of upper executives, or how some

[3] While allocative equality need not *require* the existence of a sharp organizational class system, it is often linked to status structures within organizations. For instance, there can be horizontal inequalities. Jack and Jill may be co-workers of equivalent status, and Jill may be provided a large corner office, Jack a smaller office. But this *horizontal* inequality becomes also a *vertical* inequality, insofar as one outcome is deemed superior to the other. As soon as one begins to speak of an inequality (a difference) as *better* or *worse,* one then becomes *superior* and the other *inferior,* and this takes on a verticality that takes us into the realm of status—of prestige systems.

organizations (e.g., Bank of America's New York City building; Rosman 2011) use card-key dispatch systems to apportion elevator access, letting "bank VIPs ride separately from rank-and-file staff".

In contrast, high-involvement organizations design their physical environment so as to "reinforce the classless structure of the organization" (Lawler 1986, p. 200) (Chan et al. 2007). Common practices include elimination of reserved parking, of executive dining rooms and washrooms, of special building entrances, executive elevators, or any other segregated facilities (Lawler 1986; Lawler and Worley 2006; Martin 1992; Morand 2010). There are many reasons why organizations might engage in these practices (to increase productivity, facilitate communication, engender collegiality, save money, to conform to institutional environments [i.e., mimicking other organizations]), yet it is also clear that these distributive practices do introduce a greater equalization of outcomes, and that such may properly be conceptualized relative to claims of existential member equality.

Dress

Organizational dress is also amenable to conceptualization through such a distributive lens. Differential accoutrement traditionally highlighted organizational status differences; the very terms "white" versus "blue collar" belie their origin in dress distinctions. High-involvement organizations eschew these demarcations of status (Lawler 1986; Lawler and Worley 2006), such as through adoption of common uniforms, by otherwise discouraging dress-related trappings of status, or through adoption of casual dress codes (Morand 1995; Pratt and Rafaeli 2001). Here again, the reasons for organizations' adoption of such codes are complex, yet the trappings of status can be conceptualized as a resource or outcome, the organizational distribution of which (the "right" to dress as one chooses; not having status-marked dress) here shifts in the direction of equalization.

Naming and Titles

Forms of address, linguistic honorifics, and job titles are interpersonal outcomes that in traditional organizations clearly had a differential, unequal distribution. Yet some companies (e.g., W. L. Gore & Associates) now eliminate the term "employees" from their vocabulary, instead referring to all members equally and generically as "associates" or "co-workers." By a similar logic, in high-involvement organizations "supervisors" often become "team advisors," "team consultants," "facilitators," or "advisors" (Rosen 1991; Walton 1985).

Moreover, in traditional organizational norms, governing forms of address dictated that subordinates address superiors by title plus last name (Mr./Ms./Dr. Smith), while superiors used first name speaking "down" (e.g., Bill, Mary; Brown and Levinson 1987). In contrast to this, many corporations (e.g., UPS, Hewlett Packard, Corning Inc., Xerox Corp, Mars Corp) have extinguished such differential usage—through formal policies or strong norms of "universal first naming" (Morand 2005), whereby all employees (irrespective of one's formal title in the organizational hierarchy) enjoy (and employ) the right to address one another by first name. Here again, the "redistribution" of these linguistic appellations (the reapportionment of role-related linguistic rights and obligations) is amenable to conceptualization through a distributive and existential equality lens.

Perquisites

While they play a functional role relative to attracting and rewarding talent, perquisites, by definition, imply a form of differential, equity-based allotment ("perquisite: a thing regarded as a special right or privilege enjoyed as a result of one's position", *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* 2005). But some corporations now eliminate differential perquisites, instead explicitly claiming to distribute them based on an equality rule (Fisher 2000; Hornstein 2002; Lawler 2006; Reddy 2004). For example, Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream, reputed for its egalitarian human resource practices, explicitly advertises itself as a perkless company. All benefit packages are equivalent; there are no differential medical insurance policies, country club memberships, homes, cars, tax-deferred retirement plans, stock options, low interest loans, or bonus plans (Rosen 1991). Similarly, employees of Nucor Steel receive equivalent life insurance, group hospitalization, and vacation; the firm maintains no company cars or airplanes, hunting or fishing lodges, everyone travels economy class (Iverson 1995). At a company studied by Martin (1992), claims of egalitarianism were validated in employees' eyes because "perks" were distributed not by status, but according to job-related needs—better cars to sales people, better computer monitors to design people, and so on.

Monetary Rewards

There are clear limits to the use of existential distributive equality as it relates to pay, for differential remuneration is one of the most effective and time-honored vehicles for rewarding organizations' hierarchic division of labor. However, high-involvement organizations employ a number of remunerative devices that stray from equity in the clear direction of existential equality. These practices function to moderate the effects of equity-based pay decisions, and they entail a recognition of simple membership as an underlying distributive basis. For example, delimiting ratios between the highest and lowest paid layers of a workforce is an increasingly common practice (O'Toole 2009). Whole foods limits executive pay to no more than 19 times the average hourly wage and every employee qualifies for stock options (Griffin and Moorhead 2010, p. 489). Office furniture manufacturer Herman Miller holds CEO salary to 20 times an average worker's pay (Rehfeld 1994). By placing limits on pay disparity, this practice imparts a message not of leveling in an absolute sense, but of inclusion and balanced treatment (Hornstein 2002; Pfeffer and Veiga 1999; Yaeger et al. 2006).

The concept of an all-salaried workforce is also an increasingly common practice. Here there is an equivalence not of amount but symbolically of the mode of remuneration, in contrast to traditional systems that labeled and remunerated hourly workers as "direct labor" and managers as "salaried" (Pfeffer and Veiga 1999). General motors claimed the move to an all-salaried workforce at several locations signaled an increased respect for the contribution of all employees (Warren 1986). Also, profit sharing and gainsharing are potential examples of existential distributive equality in that they bind managers and workers to a "shared fate" (Florkowski and Schuster 1992; Pfeffer 1998; Pfeffer and Langton 1993; Yaeger et al. 2006). "Hourly workers share in the profits when the company does well, and management takes cuts in pay along with the workers when sales slowdown" (Rehfeld 1994). In a company studied by Martin (1992), employees cited the existence of an employee stock ownership plan, as well as a profit-sharing plan—open to all workers—as evidence of equality.

As a critical counter to the positive tone above, it is necessary to note that Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream, a long-term follower of minimizing pay disparity between executives and lowest paid workers, eventually deemphasized the practice as they encountered difficulty in attracting and retaining chief financial officers and CEOs (Gerhart and Rynes 2003, p. 103). However, it may be that societal attitudes are now more in alignment; for instance, findings from a nationally representative American sample show preference for only a moderate degree of societal wealth inequality, regardless of respondents' actual wealth—i.e., even without Rawls' "veil of ignorance" in place (Norton and Ariely 2011).

Beyond what is currently practiced in organizations, existential-based equality may prove a fruitful argument in challenging pay disparities such as the staggering differentials between top executives and other employees—possibly more fruitful than equity-based reasoning alone. From an equity perspective, many have questioned the causal relation between CEO decisions and firm performance, and the propriety of using this ambiguous relation as justification for high executive compensation (e.g., Perel 2003; Tosi et al. 2000). However, such pay disparity might nevertheless be described as broadly equitable and economically efficient by traditional tournament theory reasoning (Lazear and Rosen 1981). Tournament pay structures apply steep wage differentials to differences in relative individual performance, with the effect of rewarding those at the top of the pay structure beyond their marginal contribution and others below their marginal contribution. The economic logic is that employees put forth greater effort as they compete for the top pay prize (e.g., many lower level employees competing for a few top management positions). Interestingly, the embedment of this winner-take-all approach in the political economy of the United States also helps explain the widening wealth gap between the top 1 % and the remainder of society (Hacker and Pierson 2010). This approach runs counter to the principle of existential distributive equality, which inherently minimizes rather than maximizes status differences and by doing so engenders motivation through social cohesion rather than competition.

Internal Labor Markets

Equal opportunity for career choice and career advancement is a classic hallmark of democracy; American cultural mythology embraces the egalitarian possibility of progressing from a "log cabin" or working class background to the country's highest position of responsibility. Yet in most organizations, the career paths of blue collar and so-called lower level workers have traditionally been isolated from the paths of managers and others with college degrees. In contrast to this, some organizations claim to have strong internal labor markets (Osterman 2001; Tachibanaki 1988). For example, at Nordstrom department stores, even those with advanced degrees start on the sales floor; promotion is strictly from within (Pfeffer 1994).

At first glance, equality of opportunity may appear to differ from other types of outcomes treated under the rubric of distributive equality. Yet the "equality of opportunity" such as created by strong internal labor markets is explicitly mentioned by Rawls (1971, 2001) as a major facet of distributive justice. Rawls states that "offices and positions must be open to everyone under conditions of fair equality of opportunity," and travels further, stating that "if offices are distributed on the basis of merit that all must have reasonable opportunity to acquire the skills on the basis of which merit is assessed" (1971, p. 72). Said another way, even when advancement opportunity explicitly exists, implicit constraints (i.e., a glass ceiling) may limit effective use of such opportunity for certain employee segments.

Women present a particularly salient example in that institutionalized norms are not gender neutral (Fraser 1997, 2009). For instance, IBM Corporation's recent promotion of an existing female employee to CEO, albeit this was a first for the 100-year-old company, speaks to equal opportunity; however, the exclusion of female members to a private golf club with instrumental ties to IBM and its past male CEOs speaks of cultural subordination, potentially undermining her actual legitimacy in the position. Also, consider an example from academia where males comprise a disproportionate share of tenured faculty despite a slightly higher proportion of females than males receiving Ph.D.'s (American Association of University Professors [AAUP] 2006). The explicit opportunity for advancement is available to both sexes, but the institutionalized norms attached to earning tenure (e.g., demanding work hours over an extended number of years) favor those not encumbered with childbearing and childcare—or historically cultural males (AAUP 2006). Some universities have counteracted this inadvertent cultural subordination with policy changes that go well beyond basic pregnancy leave, such as temporary modified work schedules for childcare (e.g., Stanford University), part time tenure-track positions (e.g., University of California, Berkeley), and extended tenure clocks (e.g., Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Of course preceding this advent was recognition for the need of such "recognition," in other words, a broader understanding of equality such as presented herein.

Caveats and Contextualization

Given organizations' tendency to assume a managerialist (Jacques 1999) perspective, it is prudent to harbor some skepticism regarding whether organizations' adoption of these distributive practices always plays out as intended. For instance, at a General Motors plant, the policy of reserved parking spaces was ended, but in practice choice spots continued to be utilized only by top executives (Pascale 1990, p. 243). Or, consider Walmart's policy of calling all employees associates. At the same time, Walmart has experienced numerous employee discrimination lawsuits that would suggest the shared title conveys little or no meaningful sense of existential equality. This is a critical issue. Overall, we have conceptualized and modeled the distributive equality of status leveling as an ideal type (Weber 1947). That is, what might and could happen in a best case scenario, not what always occurs in practice.

It is also important to realize how equality (and hence the results of any distributive equalization) is ultimately a dynamic *process* rather than static state. Here an interesting question might be: once status linked identities and practices are deconstructed, what then? How does one work out Frazer's sense of "recognition" in an ongoing way within the constraints of complex organizations? Equality, when we speak of the equal *worth* of persons, has a deeply moral dimension to it. Kant speaks of equality in terms of human worth and dignity (1785/1998), Locke as the right to self-ownership and freedom (1689/2010). The quest for equality, in the sense of moral worth and recognition, comprises thus an ongoing praxis. For example, Fraser recognition not only implies removing forms of status-linked "misrecognition" but also the creation of social and institutional practices enabling ongoing recognition, providing actors "parity of participation" in the social sphere. In short, equality in its deepest philosophical sense really has to do with *freedom*; achieving "recognition" in Fraser's sense is an ongoing human striving.

Cloke and Goldsmith's description of their (2002) work on organizational democracy (based on decades of work as consultants to organizations) provides one sense of how such processes might unfold in a dynamic sense, beyond the implementation of leveling practices described above. Indeed, their work would appear to seamlessly match up with Fraser's conceptualization of how ongoing "recognition" ("how to participate as peer in social interaction") might unfold within an organizational context (and we would doubt Cloke and Goldsmith have read Fraser). Cloke and Goldsmith's advocacy of "organizational democracy" emphasizes the import of employees' active and ongoing participation and consent relative to the choice of values, including how said values are implemented and enacted (and we here assume that *equality* is one such core value). In general, Cloke and Goldsmith center on the import of ongoing organizational dialog among members. Couched in terms of distributive justice, it is not simply what is distributed, or how equally it is distributed, but that these justice processes also involve the active engagement of members' relative to their sense of recognition and equality, and relative to how said values are institutionalized and enshrined in ongoing organizational practice.

Finally, we return to themes presented in the opening pages, regarding the broad import of equality in contemporary society. It is increasingly common for businesses to recognize that they have a responsibility to engage in the internalization of the environmental and *social* costs of doing business (e.g. Senge et al. 2010). The idea that corporations may have a responsibility for providing health care to all employees, of providing a living wage, or of considering the justice concerns of indirect workers who form part of one's global supply chain (i.e., the recent example of Apple Computer)—these all touch upon distributive issues.

And as noted, the world is currently experiencing a global socio-economic, socio-cultural crisis of unprecedented proportion—one that has as its roots a concern with accepted forms of *inequality*. The Occupy Wall Street movement (Stiglitz 2011) and some of its associated social theorists (Eisenstein 2011) draw a clear link between a global financial system that is increasingly dysfunctional, and the (presumptively) equity-driven practices (such as Wall Street salaries) that preponderate in many organizations. And such pertains to spheres of distributive justice other than inequality of income. For example, a recent study found that Americans today experience a decreasing degree of opportunity for upward mobility (Isaacs et al. 2008) in comparison to the past.

Again mirroring a strand of thought presented in the opening pages, Maynard and Mehrtens (1996) note that many businesses are already shifting to focus more on serving the needs of stakeholders, including a greater focus on the social problems of *distribution*, rather than on production per se. Sen (1999) asserts that organizations can and should play a proactive role in leading social change. In this context, beyond adopting distributive practices to augment their internal effectiveness, organizations have an ethical obligation to construct and to engineer organizations that more accurately mirror the justice processes they wish to see unfold within the larger society.

Concluding Remarks

Given the import of distributive justice for organizations, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to equality-based distribution, particularly in contrast to the vast equity-based literature. We have offered a radically different, and more fully specified, conceptualization of distributive equality. This conceptualization moves beyond the existing literature's tendency to focus on small groups and remunerative outcomes, ultimately coming to view distributive equality within organizations at a more systemic level. The paper has not only viewed equality at a *different* but also at a much *deeper* level—by considering existential equality as a valid (and valuable) construal of inputs. We have hopefully underscored the potentially profound role that distributive equality holds in both contemporary organizations, and presumptively in the psyches (the value systems) of contemporary organizational members.

Indeed, we would contend there should perhaps be an "equality theory" competing with equity for name recognition in managerial and scholarly discourse. That is, the phrase "equity theory" is well-ensconced in the vocabulary of organizational scholars. And yet, as does equity theory, the model of distributive equality surely meets the basic requirements of a theoretical construct. In general, it is important to construct theories that objectify more deeply rooted assumptions, and to build models that outline presumed cause and effect relations arising from common workplace practices. It is always vital to examine the root assumptions, the tacit knowledge (Polyani 2009/1966) underlying our "theories in use" (Argryis 1993). Of course, whether the phraseology "equality theory" ever escapes the lips of scholars, or others, is ultimately an empirical question. Our primary point here is simply that distributive equality is both much more common, and carries greater portent in terms of its potential ramifications, than is at present recognized.

Indeed, when pointing out deficits or gaps in the literature scholarship typically elides attributing causality to the gap by simply pointing out that certain perspectives or directions have been "neglected" or "overlooked". Such may be the case here; however, we might suggest an alternate, a psychodynamic view. Consider that sometimes blind spots are not random, but rather are motivated. Such was the case with Freud's "discovery" of the unconscious, and the formidable role of the sexual drive. Researchers prior to Freud did not fail to see this because they "overlooked" it, but rather were blinded to it due to the taboos surrounding issues of sex, and the idea of unconscious motivation.

In the same way, has the import of equality theory been "overlooked" for a reason? If we follow the logic out—from distribution of offices, of upward mobility, indeed especially regarding forms of remuneration—this takes one in a Marxian direction. The idea that perhaps all workers deserve a more equal share of the fruits of their labor is, particularly in US culture, highly charged. Moreover, Marxian approaches to redistribution, particularly in their more superficial form, tend to focus on material distribution—of "primary goods." But, as noted herein, if one is to take notion of equality of inputs based on existential dignity seriously, this takes us beyond a material realm. For the purpose of material redistribution is not simply to enjoy equal share of goods, but to achieve a society where everyone is not only materially well off but symbolically an esteemed and "recognized" participant. Thus, while the managerial literature has perhaps been able to tolerate mention of "symbolic egalitarianism" from an organizational culture perspective, of every member getting equal access to parking space, and so on, somehow framing the very same set of phenomena within the theoretical framework of distributive equality—may be a more "disturbing" idea. Perhaps distributive equality is a proverbial "elephant in the room."

Regarding the ongoing application of distributive equality, probably the two most essential questions—for researchers and practitioners alike—regards how to comport equality with equity, and how to comport equality with *equality*. The meaning of this second expression (equality with equality) will be explained in short order, but first, to the comporting of equity with equality.

While the notion of existential equality represents a fundamental belief set within our culture, we remain heavily invested in meritocratic ideals. The notion that differential degrees of contribution rightly result in different outcomes is not going away, nor should it. Meritocracy is a major driver of capitalism; rewards for individual achievement are a profound human motivator, and ultimately an essential element of market driven free enterprise systems.

Nonetheless, all social systems must strive to achieve a balance between agency, an individualistic self-serving orientation, and *communion*, an orientation in which the self is fused with others in a larger context (Rousseau and Arthur 1999). Balkan (1966) so argues, suggesting that social order, justice, and cohesion prevail when there is a balance between agency and communion. Keeley (1988) similarly notes that equity and equality are competing goals, the task of managers being to balance these. Mitchell and Scott (1990) note the creation of a sense of community to be an increasingly important problem area for modern organizations.

And yet, equality and equity often tend to be viewed as mutually exclusive. That is, equality rules are often presumed to foreclose upon our ability to draw upon equity as a basis for distribution, and vice versa. But perhaps if we can come to view justice more systemically (when viewed in an organizational or societal context as a whole; e.g., Ambrose and Schminke 2009; Sheppard et al. 1992), then we can see how equity and equality function in tandem—are potentially harnessed synergistically. This point to the value of knowing how, and when, equity and equality may be complementary. Indeed the distributive practices presented herein suggest that there exist a number of organizational spheres perfectly suitable for experimentation with forms of distributive equality, and suitable within the context of organizations functioning as goal driven, competitive enterprises.

Regarding the notion of balancing equality with *equality*, this deals with the idea that equality is ultimately a deeply qualitative idea, and that it's full pursuit ultimately entails an ongoing praxis. To this end, we need to continually scrutinize existing forms and possibilities for distributive equality in organizations, and compare these with the ideal of existential equality.

For example, consider organizations' practice of having no reserved parking spaces. How much does this resonate with the concept of existential dignity? It does, but contrast this to an equalization of restroom facilities. Anyone who has entered an executive versus a workers' lavatory gets a sense of striking qualitative differences—the former being very clean, very well appointed, perhaps with marble floors, and so forth. Here perhaps we touch a somewhat deeper nerve relative to the emotional meaning of equality. Or, consider health care. If different classes of employees receive differential coverage, this can affect one's life chances (for example if a top executive is able to receive a bone marrow transplant but not a worker). Such is potentially deeply violative of norms of existential equality. Alternately, consider the concept of a living wage. In venturing into this arena, organizations are clearly treating equality as an ethical precept. Accordingly, we must continue to reflect on the meaning of equality; we must consider equality in a simple and perhaps material sense, but also reflect on its deeper ethical characteristics.

Finally, as profound a concept as equality is, organizational competitiveness is also a profound concept. Jacques (1999) expressed it well when he noted that *managerialist* and *criticalist* modes of thought must both be recognized, and must both work in concert to inform one another. Organizations have financial imperatives, and ethical imperatives. Perhaps analogous to our left and right brains—we cannot help but that these cohabit one and the same body.

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