

Do just actions beget just perceptions for supervisors with intersectional identities?

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Abstract - A common responsibility of workplace supervisors is to treat their subordinates with dignity, respect, and openness. Although you might expect subordinates to think more highly of their supervisor when they are treated fairly, past research has shown that the race or gender of a supervisor can cause them to be judged more harshly when they treat workers poorly, or to gain no benefit from treating their workers well. Previous research on this topic has been limited by studying race and gender separately, and the goal of my study was to expand our knowledge of this issue by studying how race and gender interact to affect the relationship between supervisors' treatment of subordinates, and subordinates' perceptions of their supervisor. In a four-part online field survey of subordinates' attitudes toward their supervisors I found that reactions to supervisors were generally similar and positive when subordinates were treated fairly and less positive when subordinates were treated unfairly. However, while Black male and White female supervisors were judged more harshly for unfair treatment compared to White male supervisors, Black female supervisors were judged similarly to White male supervisors. These findings add to a growing literature on how intersectional identities influence workplace outcomes.

I. Introduction

The relationships between workplace supervisors and subordinates are extremely important to both parties. On one hand, subordinates who feel fairly treated are more likely to be satisfied with their job, be committed to their organization, and perceive their supervisors in a positive way [1]. On the other hand, supervisors who treat their subordinates unfairly may face negative consequences, such as perceived unfairness or incompetence.

However, the relationship between supervisor fairness and positive perceptions is not as straightforward as our intuitions might suggest. Recent research regarding *interpersonal justice*, the subset of *organizational justice* concerning whether an individual is treated with dignity and respect, has shown that while interpersonally just treatment generally improves subordinates' perceptions of their supervisor, subordinates react to good

treatment differently depending on the demographic characteristics of their supervisor. One study found that White female and White male supervisors tended to be perceived as equally competent when they treated their subordinates well, but that women were perceived more harshly when they treated their subordinates poorly [2]. Another study found that all male supervisors were perceived similarly when they treated subordinates poorly, but that Black and Hispanic male supervisors were not seen as any fairer when they treated subordinates well [3].

Unfortunately, since these studies examine gender and race in isolation, we don't know how race and gender may *interact* to affect the relationship between fair treatment and subordinates' perceptions of their supervisors. Indeed, there has been a recent push among organizational scholars to consider how individuals'

intersectional identities (i.e. gender, race, ability, etc.) change individuals' experiences in the workplace [4]. To this end, my study aimed to understand how intersections in a supervisor's identity change their subordinates' reactions to fair or unfair treatment, by considering both supervisor race and supervisor gender side-by-side.

My core prediction was that the relationship between interpersonally just treatment and subordinates' perceptions of their supervisor would differ based on the interaction between a supervisor's race and a supervisor's gender (i.e. effects that cannot be fully explained by the independent effects of race and gender.)

Previous research has shown that White women are penalized more harshly for poor treatment since gender stereotypes, which proscribe that women should be warm and communal, cause unfair treatment to be seen as less acceptable for White women than White men [2]. I expected to replicate this finding, but predicted that Black women would not be judged more harshly than other supervisor groups since Black women may not be subject to the same prescriptive stereotypes as White women [5].

Furthermore, I expected to replicate the previous result that White male supervisors and perceived highly for fair treatment, Black male supervisors are perceived poorly regardless of how fairly or unfairly they treat their subordinates, and that this difference is caused by subordinates stereotyping Black male supervisors as deceitful or untrustworthy [3].

II. Methods

To test my predictions, I conducted a four-part online field survey of subordinates' attitudes toward their supervisors. Participants were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk crowdsourcing platform. Since previous research on this topic has focused on people in the United States, only Americans were invited to participate to avoid recruiting participants from other countries which

may have different race and gender stereotypes. In the first part, 2981 participants described their own demographic characteristics as well as those of their immediate supervisor. This large sample was necessary for recruiting a sufficient number of supervisors from under-represented identity groups, and to counteract attrition over the multi-part study. We invited respondents to continue based on the race and gender of their supervisor.

The three subsequent parts of the study asked about participants' relationship with their supervisor. In the first survey, participants rated their supervisors on four dimensions of *organizational justice*, including the quality of interpersonal relationships (6). The second survey measured psychological constructs which might mediate the effect of interpersonal justice on subordinates' perceptions of their supervisor, including *perceived deceitfulness* which previously explained differences in reactions to White male and Black male supervisors [3], and *perceived unacceptability* which was hypothesized to explain differences in reactions to White male and White female supervisors [2]. In the final part of the study, we assessed the subordinates' perceptions of their supervisor in a number of areas, including the major outcome variables studied in previous studies. These variables were overall supervisor fairness, performance ratings, reward recommendations, and engagement in organizational citizenship behaviour.

A total of 413 respondents finished all four parts of the study. The sample was mostly White (68%) and equally split by gender (50% Female). Of these respondents 196 had White supervisors (50% Male), 149 had Black supervisors (54% Female), and 68 had Asian supervisors (60% Male).

Asian supervisors were excluded from the final analysis, since too few were recruited to test my hypotheses. Another 21 respondents were excluded for failing attention checks. The final sample had 324 individuals.

III. Results

I tested my predictions on four ways subordinates perceive their supervisor. **Overall Fairness:** Interpersonal justice strongly predicted perceptions of fairness ($\beta = 0.837$, $t(306) = 12.00$, $p < .01$). However, there was not a significant effect of race, gender or interaction terms on perceptions of fairness ($p > .05$). **Performance Ratings:** Interpersonal justice also significantly predicted subordinates' ratings of their supervisor's performance ($\beta = 0.572$, $t(305) = 5.90$, $p < .01$). A statistical interaction between gender and race indicated that subordinates tended to give different performance ratings to supervisors of different identity groups ($\beta = -1.086$, $t(305) = -2.20$, $p < .05$). Most importantly, a three-way interaction between interpersonal justice, gender, and race indicates that the *relationship* between supervisor treatment and subordinates' ratings of their performance differs by supervisor identity ($\beta = 1.103$, $t(305) = 2.30$, $p < .05$). **Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB):** Results showed that subordinates were more likely to "go above and beyond" for supervisors who were interpersonally just ($\beta = 0.415$, $t(305) = 4.00$, $p < .01$), but that both the level of OCB ($\beta = -1.375$, $t(305) = -2.60$, $p < .01$) and the relationship between just treatment and OCB ($\beta = 1.391$, $t(305) = 2.60$, $p < .01$) differed by identity category. **Reward Recommendations:** Similarly, results show that subordinates recommended higher rewards to supervisors who were interpersonally just ($\beta = 0.602$, $t(304) = 6.60$, $p < .01$), and that both the level of recommendation ($\beta = 0.932$, $t(304) = -2.00$, $p < .05$) and the relationship between just treatment and reward recommendations ($\beta = 0.974$, $t(304) = 2.10$, $p < .05$) differed by identity category.

These statistical analyses indicate that the supervisor's race and gender influence how their subordinates react to interpersonally just or unjust treatment. The logical next question is: how are these groups different? To supplement these

statistical tests, I plotted each model with lines of best fit for each supervisor identity group to visualize the relationship between interpersonal justice and each outcome variable. In Figures 1 and 2, we see that White men and Black women were rated most favourably, where as White women were judged more harshly for interpersonally unjust treatment, and Black men were judged most harshly for poor treatment. Figure 3 indicates that only Black men received harsher reward recommendations for interpersonally unjust treatment. In each model, supervisors that were high in interpersonal justice were perceived equally regardless of their race or gender.

I also assessed a number of possible variables that might explain these differences, including perceived deceitfulness, and perceived unacceptability. However, none of these variables had patterns similar to my central findings, and therefore cannot explain the effect of supervisor identity on subordinate perceptions.

IV. Discussion

My main hypothesis, that the relationship between interpersonal justice and subordinates' perceptions of their supervisor, was substantiated for three of the four indicators I included in my study. However, the specific differences among groups are much different than I predicted.

How do my results compare to the previous research? Consistent with previous gender research [2], White women were judged more harshly for interpersonal injustice than White men. However, if my results were caused by prescriptive gender stereotypes we would not expect Black men, who tend to be stereotyped as hyper-masculine [5], to experience similar bias. Furthermore, the previous finding that minority supervisors experience bias only when interpersonally just [3] is directly contradicted by these results. Whatever bias exists appears to predominantly affect supervisors who treat their subordinates poorly.

What about Black women? Previous research has shown that in some cases, being associated with two discriminated identities (e.g. *Black* and *Female*) can cause an even greater level of bias (7). However, my results show that Black women were not subject to any bias compared to White men. In this domain, it appears that being a Black woman negates the bias associated with being a Black man, or being a White woman. This echoes previous research showing that while White women and Black men were conferred lower status for acting in dominant ways, Black women were not (8).

My results deepen our understanding of how bias affects workplace supervisors with different intersectional identities, but fail to explain why this bias occurs. Future research should explore other potential mechanisms for this effect, and examine a broader range of supervisor identities.

V. References

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Performance Ratings vs. Interpersonal Justice by Supervisor Identity

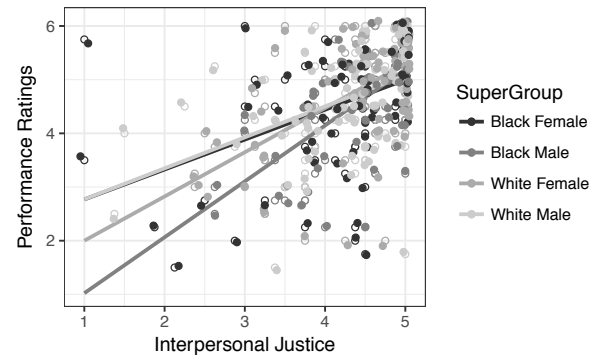


Fig 1. Compared to White men and Black women, White women and Black men receive harsher performance ratings when interpersonally unjust.

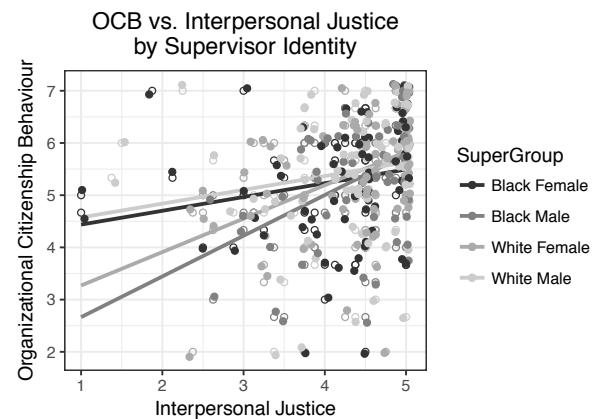


Fig 2. Compared to White men and Black women, the subordinates of White women and Black men are less likely to go above and beyond for interpersonally unjust supervisors.

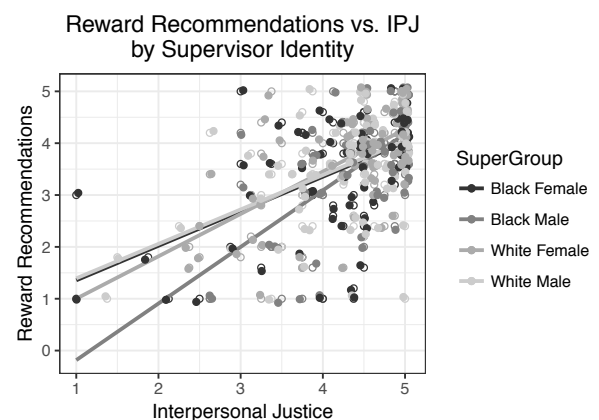


Fig 3. Compared to other groups, Black male supervisors receive lower reward recommendations when they are interpersonally unjust.