

REF. 10 The Dark Side of Org. Behavior

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CHAPTER 9

# Under-the-Table Deals Preferential, Unauthorized, or Idiosyncratic?

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Individual workers can seek special treatment or working conditions differing from what their coworkers receive. In spite of the advantages workers or their employers might receive from such arrangements, these deals skirt the dark side of organizational life. Special treatment can leave a trail of injustice and resentment, all the while eroding the organization's legitimacy—particularly from the perspective of third parties, the coworkers of that individual with the special deal. Unless third parties learn of such deals, the worker and managers involved may not even acknowledge them publicly. This under-the-table quality of many person-specific employment arrangements makes their dynamics, and often their very existence, difficult to discern.

This chapter attempts to *put on the table* the variety of forms such arrangements take, addressing the organizational complications arising from special treatment for individual workers (as well as its potential advantages). It first introduces three distinct types of person-specific arrangements, focusing particularly on one type, the idiosyncratic employment arrangement, which has the potential to fuel innovation in human resource practice and expand the choices available to workers and employers in crafting their relationship. But the potential benefits of idiosyncratic arrangements can be severely limited by their "look alike" counterparts from the

dark side of the employment relationship: preferential treatment (for example, politics and favoritism) and unauthorized appropriations (misrepresentation and theft). Moreover, poorly managed idiosyncratic arrangements can themselves create adverse consequences for all parties involved. The chapter addresses the slippery slope of poorly managed idiosyncratic arrangements, where these are construed by third parties to represent preferential favoritism or unauthorized appropriation. In particular, how well idiosyncratic arrangements are managed plays a role in the dynamics surrounding many well-established constructs in organizational behavior, from leader-member exchange to the many dimensions of justice. Finally, this chapter addresses how idiosyncratic employment arrangements can be implemented in ways that are functional for all parties involved.

Many of the things contemporary knowledge workers look to their employers for are seemingly contradictory. On the one hand, workers value flexibility in their relationship with an employer to better meet their personal needs. The schedule that lets one employee coach kids' soccer after school differs from that permitting another to run a trading business on an extended lunch break. Enabling workers to conduct a satisfying nonwork life requires a certain willingness to customize on the part of the employer. Yet consistency in treatment and comparability in outcomes are the building blocks of fairness. Fair treatment typically entails comparable arrangements across workers. We prize membership in organizations where all people are treated fairly but where our own special needs and individuality also are embraced. Workers seek treatment that affirms their individual value and self worth ("I am special") as well as their employer's overall fairness and positive identity ("Everybody thinks this is a great place to work"). As one of my colleagues put it: "I want to be part of an organization that treats everybody well and me just a little bit better."

An upside of the flexibility versus fairness dilemma can be found in the idiosyncratic employment arrangements (Rousseau, 2001; in press) whereby workers with valued skills negotiate with employers so that the needs of both are met. Such voluntary and sometimes public agreements offer the parties involved an opportunity to creatively meet personal as well as organizational needs

in ways that promote the comfort level of coworkers who might otherwise look askance on any arrangement differing from their own. But one dilemma in creating individualized arrangements is the fine line between a win-win solution of mutual benefit and those deals that hint or even smack of favoritism. To explicate the difference we next examine the several forms person-specific employment arrangements can take.

### Person-Specific Employment Arrangements

*What is my nature? It is characterized by diversity, by life of many forms, utterly immeasurable.*

ST. AUGUSTINE, *CONFESSIONS*

Person-specific employment arrangements refer to employment conditions whereby an individual obtains valued resources that differ from his or her coworkers. Although substantial benefits can come to workers and firms from customizing their terms of employment, human beings are acutely sensitive to differences in treatment. These differences are particularly salient when the individuals involved belong to the same work group or are otherwise interdependent day-to-day. Organizational accommodations to individuals have been studied as part of the normal give-and-take in work relationships (Abrahamson, 1966) and in response to the special needs of the disabled (Colella, 2001). How socially acceptable such accommodations are continues to be a concern. Employers often take great pains to downplay differential treatment while continuing to provide it under the table. The prevalence of secrecy despite public downplaying of difference is evidence of the inept and disingenuous ways employers handle otherwise justifiable differential treatment. This lack of appropriate handling of idiosyncratic arrangements exacerbates the dark side of person-specific arrangements.

There are three types of person-specific employment arrangements (Table 9.1):

1. *Preferential*—Favored treatment offered to a worker by an agent of the firm, usually the immediate manager or supervisor, to

- strengthen their personal relationship, as in the case of lowered performance standards for a worker who is a friend of the boss.
2. *Unauthorized*—Confiscation of employer resources by a worker without authorization, as in the case of theft or misrepresentation.
  3. *Idiosyncratic*—Negotiation between a worker and an employer for different arrangements based upon that worker's needs and his or her value to the firm, as in the case of a highly skilled designer who is allowed to take a one-of-a-kind sabbatical for a year to travel abroad. Idiosyncratic arrangements are often initiated by the worker, but employers themselves can initiate them for workers with distinct capabilities or those willing to undertake special duties (Rousseau, in press).

The first two arrangements are dysfunctional, creating adverse consequences for the firm's legitimacy, by eroding trust between workers and management and undermining cooperation among coworkers. The third arrangement, idiosyncratic, can be highly functional but only if its distinction from the other two is conveyed and maintained.

### Preferential Treatment

An exemplar: A small tool-and-die shop authorizes one-hour lunch breaks for all its employees. The owner's cousin who works in the shop often takes off at lunch for an hour and a half or more. The facility manager scolds all other workers if they don't return in an hour. Trying to curry favor with this influential cousin, the manager says nothing when the cousin shows up two hours late.

Table 9.1. Facets of Person-Specific Arrangements.

	Preferential	Unauthorized	Idiosyncratic
Process	Favoritism, politics	Usurped	Negotiation
Basis	Relationship	Rule-breaking	Value to firm
Beneficiary	Worker and boss	Worker	Worker and employing firm

Preferential arrangements take the form of favoritism and cronyism whereby managers (or other agents of the firm) favor certain workers over others based on personal relations or political ties. The primary basis for preferential treatment is a personal relationship between the individuals involved. Such arrangements often serve to strengthen the bond between the parties, permitting them to meet each other's needs at the expense of coworkers, colleagues, or the larger firm. The classic example of preferential treatment is the "non-obvious promotion" John DeLorean (1979) described in his book *On a Clear Day You Can See General Motors*. The ticket to promotion in the GM of the 1960s according to DeLorean was for a junior manager to cultivate a relationship with a senior executive. Executives in turn were on the look out for bright young people many rungs down the hierarchy. Giving a position up in the corporate ladder to a very junior manager created a bond whereby junior managers were beholden to senior executives for their current career success and continued opportunities. The loyalty derived from such self-interest served the political interests of the executives, though it did nothing to enhance the overall competence of GM's management.

Political in nature, these preferential arrangements undermine the legitimacy of the formal organization while advancing the personal interests of its agents (Pearce, 2001; Pearce, Bigley, & Braniczki, 1998). It could be argued that playing favorites might benefit the firm by gaining a lackey willing to do an employer's bidding. Nonetheless, such arrangements are predicated upon personal connections and not on the individual capabilities that add value to the firm.

The dysfunctional consequences of preferential treatment are amplified when a workforce is demographically or culturally diverse (Cox, 1993; Rousseau, 1995). Information selectively transmitted to certain groups permits their members to develop the political acumen to use the firm's formal and informal systems to their advantage (Ferris et al. 1993; 1996). Limited experience with the *organization-specific* political skills required to navigate a firm's hierarchy is one factor that shapes the inferior opportunities and sense of injustice women and minorities often experience (Dreher & Cox, 1998). Moreover, demographic similarity is a factor that shapes the quality of the relationship between supervisor and sub-

ordinate (Tsui, Porter, & Egan, 2002). Relationship quality—in particular, high leader-member exchange—is associated with greater career success (Brass, 2001). By virtue of demographic characteristics and cultural background, some workers have better access to valued resources than others, thus increasing the likelihood that some workers access special arrangements based upon the inside information their demographic advantages bring them. To the extent that workers get resources by negotiating with managers who trust them, what would seem to be justified flexibility for one worker and his or her manager may seem like an unfair advantage from the perspective of coworkers from different backgrounds.

The dynamics of preferential treatment are seldom studied simultaneously from the perspectives of beneficiaries and disadvantaged third parties. For instance, organizational scholars tend to view strong leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships as a net positive to the organization and to the employment relationship (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987). We note that at least in the early work on dyadic exchanges involving leaders and subordinates, the existence of both in-groups and out-groups was recognized (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1976). However, the consequences of the presence of one high LMX relationship upon other members of the work group have been largely ignored. This look at the dark side of special employment arrangements suggests that it is important to ask, What is the impact of that particular high-quality relationship on the other subordinates that the manager supervises? Relative standing within their work group is a salient issue for workers (Firebaugh, 1980; Frank, 1985). Any special treatment a worker receives from his or her high LMX supervisor can generate dysfunctional consequences for his or her peers, and for the work group generally.

Organizational politicking is closely tied to how responsive to their needs workers believe their employer is. But of course that relationship is negative. The correlation between Perceived Organizational Support (POS), measured using the 1986 POS scale of Eisenberg et al., and the widely used Perceptions of Organizational Politics scale (POPS; Kacmar & Ferris, 1991) is a whopping  $-.80$  despite evidence that these are separate constructs (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997). Not merely the support itself

but how organizations provide that support, broadly as policy or discriminately via managerial discretion, may determine whether workers construe it as fair and justified.

When reward allocations are determined primarily by personal relationships, as was the case in communist countries, a sense of injustice is pervasive within firms and often in the society as a whole (Pearce, 2001; Pearce, Branyiczki, & Bigley, 2000). Pearce quotes Haraszti's (1977) story of distrust among factory workers in communist Hungary: "Supplementary wages are our most frequent topic of conversation with the foremen. They have at their disposal a relatively large wage sum for the adjustment of individual wages. No one knows exactly how much, nor whether all or part of it is used up. . . . One thing is certain: the foremen resist paying supplementary wages. Each worker therefore concludes that if there are too many demands, less will be left for him . . . so each worker treats what he gets as a supplemental wage as a secret" (Pearce, 2001, p. 87).

Even in the context of human resource systems that attempt to base reward decisions upon worker contributions and market value, personal factors still can enter in. A worker's *true* contribution to the firm is unknowable in all but a few organizational settings. Things aren't always what they appear to be. Assessments are often subjective (objective indicators of contribution or value can be difficult to come by) and coworkers often have only incomplete information regarding the bases for managerial decisions. Recently, an administrator in my university, a man I view as very concerned about his staff and the organization, expressed surprise when some employees charged him with favoritism. He had recently promoted X into the position her former boss had held: "X was the only person who had done some of the work [her boss] had performed. When [the boss] left, we didn't even post the job, but just promoted X. Then people started complaining about a fix being in. There was no reason for them to think this."

What was a logical choice to the administrator, who possessed certain information about X's competence, can be favoritism to others who lack that information (or perhaps possess different information). Failure to follow a consistent and public promotion process in this case led to a perception of favoritism, even when the decision was effectively based on legitimate, job-related crite-

ria. Coworkers also had difficulty discerning whether X, who had performed aspects of her boss's job, was conscientious and competent or manipulative and ingratiating. Although the administrator may not care what X's motives were, her coworkers were less sanguine and held a variety of disparate opinions that the process did nothing to resolve.

### Unauthorized Taking

An exemplar: A department store salesperson sets aside an expensive swimsuit, waiting until the price is marked down after the season before buying it herself.

Unauthorized arrangements arise where a worker violates organizational rules, taking employer resources for personal use without permission. These illicit practices benefit the worker and include explicit activities such as employee theft (for example, embezzlement, misappropriation of equipment and supplies; Hollinger & Clark, 1983) and subtle behavior such as misrepresenting one's relationship to the firm for personal gain (for example, making false claims regarding one's title or position). When supervisors look the other way, such as when a convenience store manager lets the night-shift worker take groceries without paying to make working that shift more attractive, an arrangement that benefits both worker and manager is still unauthorized by the firm itself (Greenberg and Scott, 1996).

Although criminality and antisocial motivations pertain to aspects of unauthorized appropriation, some illicit behavior can be better understood from the perspective of social exchange (Greenberg & Scott, 1996). Social exchange research helps address the dynamics of illicit acts in settings in which situational factors to some extent condone or even legitimate the behavior. Illicit acts commonly include committing controlled larceny (whereby workers are permitted to take certain merchandise or set it aside until its price is reduced; Zeitzin, 1971), taking bribes (Henry, 1981), or stealing time to do personal business on the job (Bradford, 1976).

These accommodations can form part of a technically illegal, but nonetheless normative, invisible wage structure (Ditton, 1977; Greenberg & Scott, 1996). Inequitable treatment by the employer

is one basis of employee theft (Greenberg, 1993), whether that inequity is objectively evident or only subjectively experienced. Fueled by both social acceptance and personal rationalization, illicit accommodations can create a psychological contract promoting deviance (Rousseau & Parks, 1993).

The consequences of illicit accommodations are multifaceted. They reduce the legitimacy of the formal organization when rule breaking becomes institutionalized. Initial motivations for deviance can be to restore equity under conditions of low pay or other unfair work conditions. The rationalization that deviance is payback for poor employer treatment complicates attempts to create a more open and trust-based employment system. These effects can spill over to coworkers by giving rise to group norms promoting illicit acts. Attempts to realign the interests of workers and employer can meet with wide resistance in settings where formal systems are viewed with suspicion and under-the-table practices are commonplace (Leatherwood & Spector, 1991).

### Idiosyncratic Arrangements

An exemplar: As its business has grown, a consulting firm is having difficulty staffing its auditing engagements. Auditors traditionally stay in this functional area, sit for their certification examination, then get promoted as an audit partner, or else they leave to join a client firm. An auditor whose career goal is to become a tax consultant agrees to accept another auditing assignment under the condition that he will then be reassigned to another partner—whose specialty is tax.

Idiosyncratic arrangements are employment terms that are negotiated between an individual worker and an employer. Either the firm or the individual worker can initiate the negotiation. What makes these individual arrangements different from other person-specific employment is that both worker and firm benefit and some features of the arrangement differ from those that coworkers experience. (Note that for purposes of this chapter we are ignoring the distinct arrangements groups of workers such as core employees receive; Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1995.) Such individual arrangements differ both from standardized ones that employees access as a group (for example, benefits allocated to full-time

employees) and those based upon the particular positions workers hold (for example, more flexible work hours and vacations that a firm's professionals enjoy in contrast to its nonprofessional staff). Idiosyncrasy can be as explicit and clear-cut as different pay for the same work. Also, it can be as subtle as having greater autonomy and latitude on the job than one's peers enjoy.

A common motivator for workers to seek idiosyncratic arrangements is pursuit of individual flexibility to meet personal needs, such as enriching or de-stressing life outside of work. Arlie Russell Hochschild's book *Time Bind* (1997) is replete with examples of local arrangements made to the subject firm's valued workers in order to attract or retain them (from flexible work hours to one-year sabbaticals to make underwater photographs of coral reefs!). Klein, Berman, and Dickson's (2000) study of lawyers observed similar responsiveness to worker demands for flexibility but, in that sample, only in cases consistent with institutionally legitimated reasons (mothers caring for their children, but not fathers; demands from family but not personal hobbies).

Employers are motivated to offer idiosyncratic arrangements for numerous reasons, among these are to attract hard-to-find talent, retain valued employees, motivate workers when extra contributions are needed, and convey responsiveness to special worker needs. Idiosyncratic arrangements make a job more valuable to a worker and may be difficult for another employer to match.

The timing of idiosyncratic arrangements makes a difference. Workers who participate in them interpret such arrangements differently depending upon whether they arise due to pre-employment negotiation (*ex ante*) or once the worker is on the job in the context of an employment relationship (*ex post*). Workers who negotiate idiosyncratic arrangements once they are on the job are more likely to view these as signals of organizational support than are those who negotiated accommodations at the time of hire (Rousseau, 2002; Rousseau & Kim, 2003). Some *ex post* idiosyncratic arrangements are offered in order to reinforce what Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2002) refer to as "proactive reciprocity" to motivate a worker to provide special, greater, or more flexible contributions in the future, in effect to build worker loyalty to the employer (Rousseau, in press). Moreover, *ex post* arrangements are more likely to entail career-enhancing opportunities (for example, preferred assignments, visibility) that

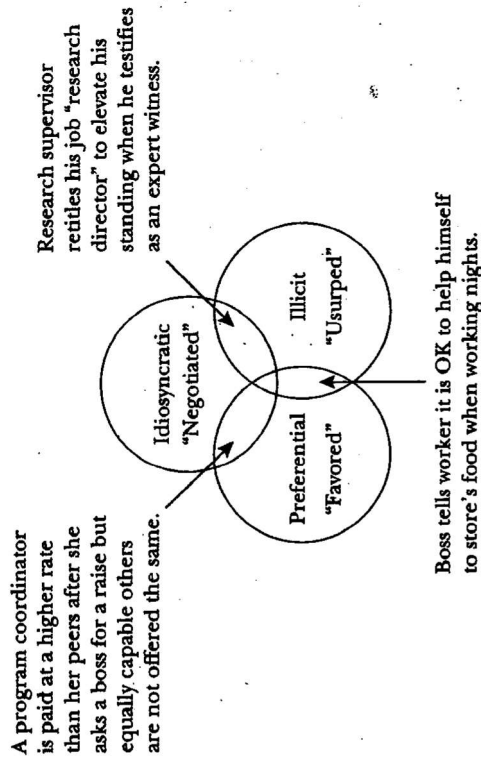
require a degree of familiarity between the worker and firm in order for these to be negotiated (Rousseau, 2002). It can be more difficult to ask for certain conditions *ex ante* because recruits are likely to have relatively limited knowledge of the firm's work, customs, and internal operations. In contrast, *ex post* deals reflect negotiations in the context of a relationship with greater trust and shared information on the part of the parties involved.

The challenge of creating idiosyncratic deals that serve the interest of both worker and firm lie in creating arrangements that third parties view as fair; in particular, immediate coworkers. Idiosyncratic arrangements that otherwise fulfill the needs of worker and employer can erode the quality of the principals' relationships with third parties who perceive these arrangements as unjust. Fairness is nonetheless easier to achieve in idiosyncratic arrangements than in the other two because the former are created to enhance achievement of organizational goals and often entail workers who make a special or distinctive contribution to the firm. A major barrier to creating "just" idiosyncratic arrangements is the blurry boundary between idiosyncratic arrangements and those that are preferential or illicit.

### Gray Areas

The boundaries among these forms of person-specific arrangement patterns can be ambiguous (Figure 9.1). Both illicit and idiosyncratic arrangements can come about under conditions in which the worker has a special relationship with his or her immediate manager. It is not uncommon for people with close ties to senior management to have unique employment roles. "Special assistants," "advisors," and long-standing "consultants" who serve at the discretion of a powerful manager very often have personal ties as well as their own distinctive competencies to thank for the particular roles they hold. Similarly, preferential treatment sometimes borders on the illicit. Consider the driver for a highly successful entrepreneur on the South Side of Chicago. The driver, who had been a boyhood friend of his boss, took "walking around money" out of the cash box to show off to his friends. Seldom spending it, he usually put the wad of cash back at the end of the day. The entrepreneur knew about his friend's behavior and looked the

Figure 9.1. Blurry Boundaries Among Person-Specific Employment Practices.



other way. Whether this situation is illicit or preferential depends on the perspective taken, and points to the tension between the objective and perceptual nature of person-specific arrangements. In the case of the South Side entrepreneur's friend, the arrangement exists at the border between the illicit and preferential.

Idiosyncratic arrangements flirt with the dark side more often where they border on the preferential: "From my first year working with the restaurant my employer provided 'special perks' to keep me satisfied. I was paid more than my peers. I interpreted this to mean they found me valuable and wanted me to stay. . . . It's sad to say but this restaurant was very political. . . . I never realized how much more I was on the 'inside' than some others. I guess I took much for granted. It was in talking to people who were frustrated by the politics that I realized how strong an element it was with this company" (thirty-four-year-old former restaurant manager).

In businesses where there is little formal performance appraisal or systematic employee development, it can be tough to keep idiosyncratic arrangements distinct from preferential ones. Such is the

case when one worker receives more latitude in choosing assignments because he or she is highly trusted. When that worker's skills develop more rapidly than his colleagues, it is not surprising that he is chosen for promotion over less favored peers. Nonetheless, without clear standards for evaluating performance, this worker's promotion is unlikely to be understood as legitimate (that is, performance-based).

The illicit also can become the idiosyncratic. An organizational psychologist believed that her formal job title, personnel research supervisor, was low in status compared to her professional peers. She printed up business cards giving herself the title of personnel research *director* to make it easier to obtain expert witness opportunities. Eventually, her manager learned about this embellishment. Worrying that the false title might surface when this psychologist was about to testify before the state legislature on the company's behalf, the manager quickly changed the psychologist's title to personnel research director. This circumstance is a form of acquiescence (Rousseau, 1995) whereby parties to the employment arrangement accept the terms that one or the other has usurped.

### The Slippery Slope to the Dark Side

The slippery slope to the dark side of person-specific employment arrangements is the confusion of idiosyncratic arrangements with their dysfunctional counterparts. Although treating individuals with respect according to their needs and individual interests is valuable for the person and the firm, how this differential treatment is handled spells the difference between being seen in the eyes of third parties as acting in good faith or unjustly.

I argue that to date the field of organizational behavior has been relatively ineffective in guiding either scholars or managers to deal with the difficulties arising when individuals seek to be treated fairly, equally, and differently. Equal treatment need not mean the *same* treatment. We have failed to address simultaneously the *three* parties affected by the typical employment relationship: the employer, the worker, and his or her coworkers. The fundamental limitation has been the scant attention that organizational behavior (OB) scholars have given to the dynamics associated with relative standing among members of a work group. We first address the dilemma of relative standing and then examine its implications for justice issues and leader-member exchange in employment relations.

### The Dilemma of Relative Standing

Idiosyncratic arrangements can throw the internal equities within the organization out of kilter. Such arrangements are behind the broad array of resources employers offer high performers relative to their lower-performing counterparts (Gerhart & Milkovich, 1992). Nonetheless, idiosyncratic arrangements can give rise to the "appearance of preferential treatment" even when the basis is a legitimate organizational goal such as worker retention or reward for high performance.

The relative standing individuals have in relation to peers plays a substantial role in the dark side of organizational life. Social standing is largely a within-group process. Or as Robert Frank (1985, p. 8) suggests: "Our 'needs' depend very strongly on those with whom we *choose* to associate closely." A utility function for individual status needs could be operationalized as "feel bad whenever you are less well provided for than your peers." Consider millionaire baseball players feeling cheated and taken advantage of because of even higher salaries offered to peers: "To be 50 or 60 on the pay scale doesn't sit well in my stomach. . . . I signed a contract, but no, I'm not happy with it anymore because baseball is business just like any other job. There are A players, B players and C players. I have been an A player for a long time" (Frank Thomas as quoted in Berkow, 2001, p. D2).

Status in local hierarchies may be a thing of considerable value. Although negative consequences arise from being at the bottom, being higher in the hierarchy accesses valued resources that are often in fixed supply (training, money, opportunities, choice). Frank (1985) argues that paying people their marginal product (the economist's ideal) seldom occurs in reality, as people at the top of the hierarchy access special gains from their position aside from pay and others at the bottom incur special costs. The presence of non-monetary payouts to high-status members puts pressure on employers to reduce variation in pay. (Indeed paying people their marginal product would be perceived as an unfair wage structure if high performers also were accorded more respect and recognition than lower-performing peers.) In effect a "fair" wage should compensate people for where they stand in their respective earning hierarchies.

The dynamics of idiosyncratic arrangements point out why in understanding differential treatment it is important to address

simultaneously the vantage points of employer, focal employee, and coworkers. Though many core concepts in organizational research involve these three parties, theory and research seldom take into account *all three perspectives* at the same time. I suggest, however, that core organizational behavior concepts, including leader-member exchange and all three forms of justice (procedural, distributive, and interactive) can better inform scholars and practitioners regarding how idiosyncratic arrangements can be made functional through simultaneous consideration of the vantage point of all three parties. Moreover, the conditions under which legitimated idiosyncratic arrangements arise have powerful implications for research on leader-member exchange and justice in the workplace.

### Procedural Justice

Procedural justice pertains to beliefs regarding the fairness of procedures governing decisions. Originally conceptualized in terms of formal procedures (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman & Taylor, 2001; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), procedural justice extends to informal procedures used by those with power to make decisions. It leads to greater overall satisfaction with decision-making experiences. One key feature of procedural justice is voice, the opportunity to express one's point of view and influence the proceedings (Greenberg, 1996; Tyler, 1988). Procedural justice is more highly related to certain attitudinal outcomes, such as satisfaction, than is distributive justice (Alexander & Ruderman, 1987). It completely mediates the relationship between participation and satisfaction, highlighting the link between voice and fairness (Roberson, Moya, & Locke, 1999). Those idiosyncratic arrangements negotiated by workers can be construed as a form of voice that individuals exercise over their conditions of employment.

Though voice is a central feature of procedural justice, workers in the same firm do not necessarily have or avail themselves of the same opportunities for input into the decisions affecting them. Freeman and Rogers (1999) in a national survey of American workers found that workers who were of higher occupational status were more likely to exercise the opportunity to avail themselves of an employer's open-door policy. Believing one's self to have standing in one's employing firm may be a necessary condition for exercising voice. If voice is not equally accessed, or importantly exercised, it

increases the likelihood that procedural justice is confounded with status issues in firms.

Voice is only one facet of procedural justice. Other features of procedural justice may be more difficult to execute in the context of idiosyncratic arrangements, particularly when these arise due to novel circumstances with which the firm has limited experience. Aside from voice, conditions of procedural justice include accuracy, representativeness, bias suppression, and consistency (Leventhal, 1980), and these can be difficult to achieve in the new or nonroutine situations often characteristic of idiosyncratic arrangements.

Employers often find it difficult to use personnel processes characterized by procedural justice when issues arise that are outside their prior experience. Procedural justice typically involves some degree of standardized practice in implementing personnel actions (for example, terminations, layoffs, and introduction of no-smoking policies; Greenberg, 1996). A base of experience is required to create procedures and implement them consistently and effectively (Pearce, Branyiczki, & Bigley, 2000). In consequence, standardizing idiosyncratic arrangements is difficult since they often are a response to special demands or needs. (As one respondent commented in Lee, MacDermid, and Buck, 2000: "Don't get rigid about flexibility," p. 1221.) For example, when law and accounting firms began affirmative action programs to promote women, they had little experience and fewer policies regarding pregnant professionals or nursing mothers. In early phases of adapting to such a change in human resource practice, inconsistency is inevitable. Diversity of interests in the labor force makes complete standardization of practices difficult, though cafeteria-type benefit arrangements are an exemplar of the standardization of flexibility (Barringer & Milkovich, 1997). Nonetheless, despite pressures for standardization, some degree of inconsistency is necessary for experimentation and to recruit new workers from non-traditional backgrounds. Procedural justice research provides little guidance on how to experiment fairly.

### Distributive Justice

Distributive justice refers to the fairness with which individuals evaluate the outcomes they and others receive. Individuals can have a variety of standards of comparison for evaluating distributive justice



(for example, market, contribution, or comparison to others). The choice of comparison depends on the distribution rule used (for instance, equal pay for equal work, preexisting agreement, need). Distributive fairness is to a great extent a function of social comparison (Goodman, 1974). Remember the millionaire baseball player described above who feels cheated by the even higher salaries offered to peers.

Because idiosyncratic arrangements create special treatment for one worker, they challenge the conventions of distributive fairness (for example, salary surveys, benchmarks, and preestablished criteria). For this reason, idiosyncratic arrangements often are associated with obfuscation, that is to say, practices that limit the ability of coworkers to make comparisons. Pay secrecy policies are the exemplar of comparison-reducing practices, since they attempt to suppress communication between coworkers regarding compensation (Rosen, 1981). Informal practices also discourage comparison by suppressing information ("don't tell anyone") or making arrangements difficult to verify ("don't put it in writing"). Unfortunately, this failure to make transparent the conditions giving rise to idiosyncratic arrangements means that potentially legitimate person-specific arrangements often wind up having the same dysfunctional consequences of their less legitimate counterparts.

Complicating the picture, workers can seek out idiosyncratic arrangements to compensate for what they believe to be otherwise unfair or inequitable treatment. When workers seek redress from employers whom they perceive to have violated their psychological contract, the remedial action taken sometimes takes the form of an idiosyncratic arrangement such as a special assignment that substitutes for a promotion that failed to materialize (Rousseau, Robinson, & Kraatz, 1992). These remedies arise following employee complaints and often are directly negotiated by workers with their own manager or his or her superior (Rousseau, 1995). In an intriguing parallel, employee theft can occur when managers turn a blind eye toward workers appropriating company supplies and equipment for their personal use, as a means to informally compensate the worker for low wages or otherwise inadequate employment arrangements (for example, having to work undesirable shifts; Greenberg & Scott, 1996). Supervisory collusion in worker pilfering is an extra-legal adjunct to the firm's reward sys-

tem, what Ditton (1977) called the "invisible wage structure." To date, research on distributive justice has largely ignored the less monetizable, intrinsic, and social rewards that workers derive from employment. It also has ignored the offsets workers seek to make organizational practices more distributively fair, if only for themselves as individuals. Idiosyncratic arrangements commonly involve negotiations over employment terms other than money (Rousseau, Ho, & Kim, 2003), thus suggesting that distributive justice research needs to be better informed regarding the broader array of exchanges arising in employment.

### Interactional Justice

Interactional justice refers to the quality of interpersonal treatment received during the execution of an organizational decision or process (Bies & Moag, 1986). Bies and Moag maintain that employee attributions for the source of interactional justice generalize to the person carrying out the procedure (for example, one's manager or a human resource staff member) whereas procedural justice is attributable to the entity whose procedures are involved (for example, the firm). Interactional justice predicts supervisor-related outcomes whereas procedural justice accounts for organization-related ones (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2001; Masterson & Taylor, 1996). In contrast to the typical focus of interactional justice—that is, whether a recipient feels treated respectfully—at issue more often in idiosyncratic arrangements is the treatment of third parties. The worker with the idiosyncratic agreement is an active participant, negotiating his or her own terms at least to some extent. Participants are likely to believe themselves to be treated more fairly in terms of interactional justice than do their peers.

Social accounts shape perceptions regarding interactional justice. As explanations made in an attempt to influence how parties interpret a decision, accounts can alter beliefs regarding the decision's legitimacy, the responsibility that decision makers have for the decision or its outcome, their motives for an action, or perceptions of the action's unfavorability (Sitkin & Bies, 1993). Idiosyncratic accommodations are by definition influenced by both the worker and the employer, reflecting both their interests and making each responsible for its terms. Under conditions of idiosyncratic

arrangements, the principals to the negotiation are in a position to negotiate based on their own personal beliefs regarding what is legitimate and acceptable. However, third-party perceptions regarding the deal's legitimacy and unfavorability can vary. Anticipating reactions of peers and coworkers is important to implementation of idiosyncratic arrangements.

When idiosyncratic arrangements are made to accommodate circumstances not covered by existing procedures, they are likely to engender one of two responses: disclosure coupled with an explanation for the arrangement (that is, a social account) or secrecy. Social accounts that explain the basis for idiosyncratic arrangements can enhance their legitimacy, but doing so requires that the arrangement (its existence if not all its terms) is made public. Secrecy exists when the idiosyncratic arrangement is not publicized, and thus no account is likely to be offered. Although secrecy can be a means of protecting recipients from an embarrassing disclosure (for example, a medical condition precipitating some accommodation), more often it is employed to keep coworkers from feeling inequitably treated or making a similar request. Such conditions erode both transparency of the personnel action and equality of outcomes workers experience. Since open and honest communication gives rise to interactional justice (Bies & Moag, 1986), secrecy is expected to be negatively related to interactional justice. In contrast, a social account focusing on the legitimacy of the accommodation can enhance both interactional justice and signal the organization's respect for individuals.

### Leader-Member Exchange

LMX refers to a high-quality relationship between a manager and his or her subordinate based upon strong ties of loyalty, trust, mutual respect, and emotional attachment. High-LMX relationships are related to the satisfaction, performance, and retention of the workers party to the relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Moreover, managers are more likely to give broad latitude to their high-LMX subordinates in shaping their own roles, crafting tasks in ways that those workers find personally gratifying, and otherwise permitting high-LMX workers to shape their work experience along lines that reflect their own interests and needs (Graen &

Scandura, 1987). Not an unmitigated good, such strong ties require time and energy to maintain, are difficult to break, and can close off other opportunities (Brass, 2001). We know little of how high-managerial investment in certain subordinates affects their relationships with *other* subordinates. How promotion, development, support, and recognition are allocated within the workgroup is likely to be influenced by the nature of a manager's relations with individual group members. It is likely that workers who are party to a high-LMX relationship are advantaged in their ability to garner valued resources from their manager. Thus, the consequence of a high-LMX relationship upon coworkers not party to it can be adverse, yet researchers have largely ignored the impact of high-LMX relationships on low-LMX coworkers not party to them. In one of the few studies examining the contextual effects in relation to LMX, Conglisier and Schriesheim (2000) find evidence of numerous contextual factors shaping subordinate LMX perceptions (for example, leader power and reward climate). However, the impact of within-group variance in the quality of the supervisor-to-subordinate relationship has not yet been investigated. I would anticipate, however, that a major concern to low-LMX coworkers would be the extent to which the manager and the broader firm were viewed as just.

### Implications

Idiosyncratic arrangements differ from the narrow array of resources typically examined in justice research in that they span the broad array of resources exchanged in employment. Distributive justice research largely addresses monetizable resources (pay, promotion, development opportunities; Adams, 1965), ignoring less monetizable resources such as interpersonal support. Procedural justice research addresses the process whereby firms allocate resources to workers with a focus on consistency in treatment, but it is relatively silent on flexibility (Tyler, 1988). Interactional justice research focuses specifically on relational issues of respect (Bies & Moag, 1986) but fails to address the potentially distributive quality of respect shown to one worker but not others. Moreover, the consequences of idiosyncratic arrangements are arrayed differently than in traditional justice research. Although workers are recipients

of employer-initiated conditions in the three "justices" described above, both workers and employers are principals playing an active role in shaping the terms of a worker-initiated idiosyncratic arrangement. In the latter context, pertinent fairness judgments rest in the minds of third parties, typically coworkers who would compare their own work arrangements to those of the focal worker. The vantage point of third parties is particularly critical to understanding the implications of idiosyncratic arrangements, since the potential array of resources exchanged varies in both salience and visibility, two conditions not addressed in traditional justice studies.

Idiosyncratic arrangements benefit both the worker and employer who negotiated them. Since their basis lies in the needs of individual worker and firm, in contrast to preferential and illicit arrangements, both principals are inclined to see this arrangement as fair. Third parties, in particular, coworkers, are likely to have more complex and varied reactions to idiosyncratic arrangements. Anticipation of third-party reactions is one factor influencing what worker and employer are willing to negotiate and the processes involved in creating idiosyncratic arrangements (Rousseau, in press). Another research domain, LMX has been largely silent on how coworkers react to their manager's having a particularly high-quality relationship with one of their peers. The notion that the LMX is an unmitigated good merits greater scrutiny, particularly in terms of coworker reactions and whether the resources exchanged between supervisors and their valued subordinates adversely affect the opportunities available for other subordinates.

### **In Support of Idiosyncratic Arrangements**

Despite the obviously slippery slope between idiosyncratic arrangements and their dark side counterparts, I advocate for the continued need to develop and enhance use of idiosyncratic arrangements and for more systematic research on them.

Why do person-specific arrangements arise in the first place? Individual differences, and their increasing salience, are one answer. In contemporary firms individuals often work in micro-environments of their own design (sales staff operating out of their house and car, book editors who use Starbuck's for an office, finan-

cial traders for New York firms working from Tel Aviv and Teluride). Prevalence of such practices creates both opportunities for and expectations of employment arrangements compatible with individual preferences and needs (Rousseau, 1997; Weick, 1996). Over one hundred years of scientific psychological research indicates the inherent differences between people (Galton, 1879). Early industrial psychologists recognized that the organizational environment often had restrictive effects on the maximum use of individual capacity (Viteles, 1932; p. 109). The shift from the highly structured organization of the past to the more flexible organizing of contemporary work means that as traditional structures loosen, individuals have a greater hand in shaping their own working conditions. In this context, organizational control increasingly focuses more on job performance and business outcomes and less on how workers behave and the means they choose to achieve the firm's objectives.

This shift co-occurs with the need to find appropriate ways of motivating workers for whom the promise of job security is no longer credible (Rousseau & Shperling, 2003). Employers need new ways to motivate and retain valuable workers. Where traditional incentives such as seniority and retirement benefits have lost their credibility, and too long a stay in a firm can hamper one's employability, employers are challenged to create an employment relationship with a valued worker with which a firm's competitors would have a difficult time competing. In response, employers have expanded the resources they provide as inducements. This expansion of resources is what Bloom and Milkovich (1996, p. 26) call the "bundle of valued returns." Shifting how we think about compensation away from cash-based pay to the relationship among all valued returns, Bloom and Milkovich argue that how workers react to almost any compensation decision is influenced by other valued returns included in the bundle. Incentive pay's impact on behavior can depend upon the presence of other elements in the bundle, such as job security or autonomy, as well as the overall quality of the employment relationship. Having a quality relationship and an opportunity to work on preferred projects can add value to one's compensation package and amplify the performance that incentive pay is intended to promote. Moreover, adding more intangibles to the bundle makes it less likely that the worker can

be lured away by another firm, since intangibles can be difficult to negotiate *ex ante*. Competitors would have a difficult time matching a mixed bag of cash, intrinsic job features, and relational advantages.

Finally, idiosyncratic arrangements that mix various resources also promote third-party perceptions of fairness by reducing comparison and making assessments of injustice more difficult. Broader bundles allow a mix of inducements based on resources that particular individuals value differently. High performers are often underpaid compared to their marginal product but receive a broader array of resources (from status and flexibility to other perks and higher pay) than average performers (Gerhart & Milkovich, 1992). This mix permits exchanges that are valued by the high performer but whose components are less likely to trigger a sense of inequity on the part of colleagues. Colleagues who might otherwise object to extraordinarily higher pay for a peer often can accept that star's getting a little more respect, since that respect may be legitimate in the eyes of the peer or not even particularly salient. One consequence of this differential reward pattern for high performers is that star performers in investment banks have been found to have lower turnover than nonstars despite their greater marketability. Special perks made available to stars by an employer can also make stars more resistant to outside offers, thus allowing them to remain in the firm to develop firm-specific capabilities that reinforce their star status and making it likely that they can be more productive by staying where they are. The connection between special treatment and development of firm-specific capabilities is likely to be mutually reinforcing and can account for the finding that individuals who have been high performers for some time are much less likely than new stars to switch employers (Croysberg & Nanda, 2002).

### Organizational Practice

It's in the implementation where one can separate the flexibility of idiosyncratic arrangements from the favoritism and exploitation characteristic of preferential treatment and unauthorized arrangements. The hallmark of legitimate and functional differences in treatment between individual workers is the existence of three conditions:

- *Transparency.* It is public knowledge within the firm that an individual's employment conditions differ from his or her peers and the process whereby that negotiation has occurred is communicated to organization members.
- *Equality.* Other individuals could have negotiated similar conditions if they had met the standards that such a negotiation requires (for example, contribution or value to the firm) or valued those conditions in the first place (for example, preferring to work reduced or greater hours than the norm).
- *Differentiation.* Respect for individual differences is inherent in the social setting's values. Firms that focus on results rather than behavioral conformity may be in a better position to negotiate with workers in crafting customized employment relations because they are tolerant of different ways of getting the job done.

These three principles respect the dignity and value of all parties to the employment negotiation: worker, employer, and third parties such as coworkers whose social standing is affected by the treatment their fellows receive. Careful implementation based on these principles keeps clear the boundary between idiosyncratic arrangements and their dysfunctional counterparts (Rousseau, in press).

### Conclusion

This chapter has taken a close look at circumstances wherein a worker has an employment arrangement that differs from his or her peers. It has examined the process whereby differential treatment arises and is socially interpreted, particularly where workers are active in creating work conditions that meet their personal needs. One central theme is that there are at minimum three parties to the typical employment relationship: the employer, a worker, and his or her coworkers. Viewing an individual's distinctive employment arrangement from the perspective of third parties as well as its principals raises important issues regarding the dynamics of several traditional concepts in organizational research ranging from LMX to forms of justice. Features distinguishing idiosyncratic employment arrangements from their dark side counterparts, preferential treatment and unauthorized taking, provide a

basis for flexible treatment for individual workers that is fair to all. By shining a light on the dark side of person-specific employment arrangements, we can better discern how to create beneficial idiosyncratic arrangements, thus avoiding the pitfalls of their destructive counterparts.

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