How Employees Select Referents for Justice Judgement: Evidence from China

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Abstract. Justice judgement depends on the social comparison of referents, so referent selection is the core issue of justice. In this study, a qualitative method was used to analyse the way in which employees select referents, and the following two characteristics were found: first, groupization, which means that comparisons are made among different groups rather than individuals; and second, feasibility, which is the reason for the selection of a group. Ability, intention and background were the origins of feasibility. The theoretical contributions and empirical implications of this study are finally discussed.

Introduction
Justice has always been a topic of great concern. People pay attention to fairness in the consideration of realistic interest relations and, more importantly, out of concern for themselves, others and the meaning of mankind. The theory of equity suggests that the method by which people judge fairness is to compare the ratio of their gain to the investment of the referent. If the ratio is equal, it produces a sense of fairness, and vice versa [1]. Colquitt proposed that, although it is possible to use a simple formula to explain justice, people's perception of justice is undoubtedly a process of subjective judgement, especially the choice of referent [2]. Greenberg, an authoritative scholar in the field of justice, proposed seven directions for research on justice, including the selection of referents [3]. It can be seen that the selection of referents is of great theoretical significance for understanding the sense of justice.

From the realistic view, with the reform, opening up and rapid development of the economy, the income and living standards of employees of all kinds of organizations in China have been improved greatly, but the sense of unfairness has also become increasingly strong. The most of the examples about the sense of justice cited by Chinese organizational staffs are unfair and few are fair. Employees' sense of injustice will generate many negative consequences, such as a decline in work enthusiasm, idleness and leaving the job. Therefore, this paper investigates how Chinese employees select referents for justice social comparison, understands and grasps the formation of Chinese employees' sense of justice of the source and then formulates targeted management countermeasures. It has important practical significance.

How do Chinese employees select referents for justice social comparison? What are the rules and characteristics? The previous research lacks a discussion of this aspect. In a word, based on the dual needs of the theoretical development and the Chinese reality, this study focuses on how Chinese employees choose a referent for justice social comparison.

Literature Review
The previous research has found that the two main factors that influence the selection of referents for justice social comparison are similarity and availability [4]. Similarity means that people tend to make comparisons with people who are similar to themselves. The greater the similarity to the referent, the stronger the impact on the sense of justice [5]. Schaubroeck and Lam found that, when a bank clerk's application for promotion is rejected, the more similar he or she is to the person who has been promoted (the referent), the greater the sense of injustice and jealousy [6].
Availability refers to the possibility of obtaining information about the referent. Gartrell argued that people tend to choose others with small space distance and more social contacts as referents, although sometimes these referents are not very similar to themselves and even differ greatly in their jobs [7]. For example, cleaners often refer to builders, who work in every corner of the city, and are most in contact with them. Roberson found that, in highly interdependent teams, employees tend to be more inclined to make comparisons in teams because of the availability of information [8]. Kulik and Ambrose proposed that the selection of referents depends first on availability, and similarity will play a role only if information on multiple referents is available [9]. Thus, the upstream and downstream enterprises in the industrial chain are easy to use as referents for justice social comparison.

In general, the factors influencing employee referent selection seldom change, and referent selection has the characteristics of stability [10]. Stepina and Perrewe asked participants to assess whether their pay was fair or not and report their most important referent, and direct reports were collected at two points in time separated by approximately 24 months [11]. The results showed that most of the subjects reported no change in referents.

Most of the previous studies have used the questionnaire method. The results are too rough, because, even for colleagues, some will be referents and some will not. In another study model, researchers have listed some specific and common referents and asked the subjects to choose how often they compare themselves with them, such as "once a month", "once a week", "once a day" or "several times a day"; the higher the frequency is, the more important the reference is [12]. This description is further from reality. This can have a subversive effect on the sense of justice.

In conclusion, given that referent selection is not easy to quantify and considering the lack of local situation analysis, this study adopts qualitative research methods to collect data on the referent selection of Chinese employees. The rules and characteristics of the selection of referents for Chinese employees are summarized.

Method

Interviewees and Interview Outline

During the interviews, 12 men and 8 women were interviewed: 5 employees of state-owned enterprises, 5 employees of private enterprises, 4 employees of foreign capital and joint ventures and 6 employees of institutions. There were 12 grassroots employees and 8 middle-level and above employees. Among them, 14 had a college degree or a bachelor's degree and 6 had below three-year college education. The industries covered electrical appliances, cars, coal, real estate, electricity, education, IT, social welfare, culture and administrative institutions. For the purpose of the study, an interview outline was compiled to guide the interviews.

Research Process

Interviews. All the interviews were conducted independently by the researchers. Before the interviews began, the author first promised not to infringe on the individual privacy of the interviewees. No information about the interviewees and their units would appear in the study report. The informed consent was signed with the permission of the interviewees, and the whole interview process was recorded. After the interviews, the interview log was written, the interview questions were recorded and the interview strategies and techniques were summarized.

Transcripts. Transcripts of the recorded material were made by five trained master's students. All the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim into text files. The transcripts were completed. All the text files were checked by the researchers themselves against the recorded data to ensure the reducibility and reliability of the transcripts. Finally, 20 interview recordings were transcribed. The total time was 727 29 seconds.

Data Arrangement and Analysis. In this study, the Weft WDA software was used as an auxiliary tool for coding. According to the idea of rooted theory, only through the in-depth analysis of the data can a certain theoretical framework gradually be formed.
Results

Through the analysis of the interview data, this study found that Chinese employees prefer to make comparisons within their organization and that the selection of referents has two core characteristics: group and reality.

Importance of Internal Comparisons

The interview data show that Chinese employees pay more attention to internal comparisons. It can be concluded from the interview data that Chinese employees pay more attention to comparisons with internal referents for two reasons: on the one hand, they feel that they are more meaningful and that a greater impact can be achieved from comparing themselves with people who are close to them. On the other hand, information for internal comparisons is easier to obtain, more comprehensive and easier to compare than information for external comparisons. When interviewees talked about whom they would compare themselves with within the organization, they had two characteristics: comprehensiveness and similarity.

Groupization

By analysing the interview data, it was found that, whether judging justice or not, Chinese employees compare themselves more with a group than with a specific individual. At the same time, the interviewees used more subjects like "we" than "me", indicating that the position of the self is also in a group.

Why do Chinese employees tend to make comparisons among groups? There are three reasons for the information obtained from the interviews: a comparison between groups can synthesize all kinds of information, and the results of a comparison are more accurate; when you put yourself into a group, the results of the comparison are targeted at the whole group, not the individual, which can reduce the anxiety caused by it; and, when appealing to the organization, the subject of the statement is "us" and not "me" for the benefit of the group and not the individual.

By synthesizing the interview data, we found that organizations' staff members have difficulty in obtaining accurate and comprehensive information about the reference group and often use a representative of the reference group to speculate about the group, especially the heuristic information on the overall situation of the reference group derived from the extreme value and the mean value.

Reality

When the interviewees explained why they make comparisons with some people and not with others, either explicitly or implicitly, they pointed to "reality". This suggests that reality is a core concept to explain the selection of referents for Chinese employees. From the interview materials, the "reality" mentioned by the interviewees is whether they can reach the same state as the referent. If so, it is appropriate to use him/her as a referent; if not, it is not appropriate and he/she is not suitable as a referent.

The results of the interviews indicate that the interviewees' evaluation of reality includes three aspects. The first is the assessment of ability, that is, whether they have the ability to engage in the work of the reference object or to enter the industry to which they belong. Finally, reality also includes a huge gap in background or opportunity.

Theoretical Contribution, and Directions for Future Research

This study explores how Chinese employees choose referents and finds that they are more inclined to compare themselves within their organization. The most important theoretical contribution of this study is the finding of the two core characteristics of the groupization and reality of the Chinese employees in the selection of referents.

It is clear that justice social comparisons are not individual comparisons for organizational employees but rather comparisons of their own group and a reference group. In their theoretical analysis, Bolino and Turnley suggested that, in the context of a collectivist culture, people might be
compared more in the form of groups [13], which coincides with the discovery of this study. Future research can explore how middle and senior employees choose referents and the similarities and differences between them.

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References


