



What influences managers' procedural fairness towards their subordinates? The role of subordinates' trustworthiness



Guozhen Zhao^{a,*}, Ya-Ru Chen^b, Joel Brockner^c

^a Graduate School of Business, Rutgers University, 1 Washington Park, Newark, NJ 07102, United States

^b Johnson School of Management, Cornell University, Sage Hall, Room 346, Ithaca, NY 14853, United States

^c Columbia Business School, Uris Hall, Room 715, New York, NY 10027, United States

HIGHLIGHTS

- Four cross-national studies examined when and why the trustworthiness of subordinates influenced managers' procedural fairness.
- Subordinates seen as having more benevolence trustworthiness elicited greater procedural fairness from their managers.
- Subordinates seen as having less integrity trustworthiness elicited greater procedural fairness.
- The positive (negative) relationship in the two above bullet-points was stronger when subordinates were higher in ability trustworthiness.
- The relationship was also mediated and moderated by managers' desire to keep good working relationship with and control over their subordinates.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 June 2014

Revised 6 April 2015

Available online 11 April 2015

Keywords:

Procedural fairness

Trust

Relational motivation

Control motivation

ABSTRACT

Four studies examined when and why the trustworthiness of subordinates influenced their managers' procedural fairness towards them. Subordinates seen as having *more* benevolence trustworthiness elicited greater procedural fairness from their managers, whereas subordinates seen as having *less* integrity trustworthiness elicited greater procedural fairness. Moreover, the positive (negative) relationship between subordinates' benevolence (integrity) trustworthiness and managers' procedural fairness was more pronounced when subordinates were perceived as higher in ability trustworthiness. Additional moderating and mediating findings suggest that managers' tendencies to show high procedural fairness towards their subordinates reflect two different underlying motivations: (1) to help managers maintain or cultivate good working relationships with their subordinates, and (2) to maintain control over their subordinates, that is, to make it less likely for subordinates to behave in ways that disrupt managers from attaining their goals. Implications for the organizational justice and trust literatures are discussed.

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Hierarchy permeates social and organizational life (e.g., Blader & Chen, 2012; Fiske, 2010; Gruenfeld & Tiedens, 2010). As sociologists and anthropologists have long noted, whenever social actors gather, a hierarchy among these actors naturally emerges (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1962; Homans, 1961). One important consequence of hierarchy is differences in decision-making authority as a function of people's position in the hierarchy (Gruenfeld & Tiedens, 2010). This may help to explain why there has been a lot more research on how those higher in the hierarchy influence those lower in the hierarchy than the other way around, even though the influence process between those higher and lower in the hierarchy goes in both directions. Unfortunately, the relative lack of attention to how managers are affected by their subordinates renders incomplete our understanding of exchanges and

encounters between managers and their subordinates, and thereby reflects an important gap in the study of employer–employee relations. Whereas recent theory and research have begun to examine how subordinates' behaviors and attitudes influence their managers' tendencies to be fair (e.g., Cornelis, Van Hiel, De Cremer, & Mayer, 2013; Hoogervorst, De Cremer, & Van Dijke, 2013; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005; Scott, Colquitt, & Paddock, 2009), much still needs to be learned about the influence that subordinates have on their managers.

Relationships between managers and their subordinates entail high interdependence and risk (Kramer, 1999; Williams, 2001). Subordinates depend on their managers to treat them well, and managers depend on their subordinates to get the work done. However, each party may not be certain that the other will live up to its end of the bargain. Given the interdependence and associated risk in manager–subordinate relationships, each party's trustworthiness is likely to be quite consequential to the other. For example, a meta-analysis (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007) showed that managers' trustworthiness affects an array of subordinates' work attitudes (e.g., organizational

* Corresponding author at: Broom Hall 262, College of Business, Delta State University, Cleveland, MS 38733, United States.

E-mail addresses: gzhao@deltastate.edu (G. Zhao), yaru.chen@johnson.cornell.edu (Y.-R. Chen), Jb54@columbia.edu (J. Brockner).

commitment) and behaviors (e.g., task performance). In contrast, relatively little research (e.g., Zapata, Olsen, & Martins, 2013) has examined the effect of subordinates' trustworthiness on their managers' work attitudes and behaviors. Given the significance of trustworthiness in interdependent relationships, and given our interest in examining how subordinates affect their managers, further research on how managers are affected by their subordinates' trustworthiness is clearly warranted.

Whereas subordinates' trustworthiness may affect managers in numerous ways, we examined the effect of subordinates' trustworthiness on managers' procedural fairness in particular, for several reasons. First, dating back to the seminal works of Thibaut and Walker (1975) and Lind and Tyler (1988) among others, many studies have shown that managers' procedural fairness affects a wide array of subordinates' behaviors and beliefs. Given the ubiquitous consequences of managers' procedural fairness, one logical next step for justice scholars is to delineate the antecedents of managers' procedural fairness (Scott et al., 2009). Hence, the present research examines managers' procedural fairness behavior as a dependent variable rather than as an independent variable, positing that one likely determinant of managers' procedural fairness is their perceptions of their subordinates' trustworthiness.

Second, examining the antecedents of managers' procedural fairness may enable us to broaden our understanding of why people care about procedural fairness. By focusing on those on the receiving end of decisions, prior theory and research have identified a host of reasons why people prefer to be treated with high procedural fairness. Such reasons include: (1) instrumental, that is, high procedural fairness leads people to believe that they are likely to receive their share of outcomes (Thibaut & Walker, 1975), (2) relational, in which high procedural fairness causes people to believe that they are respected, valued, and included (Lind & Tyler, 1988), (3) uncertainty management, such that high procedural fairness helps people reduce or manage various sources of uncertainty (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002), and (4) deontic, in which high procedural fairness reassures people that basic principles of morality have been upheld (Folger, 2001). By focusing on those who plan and implement decisions, however, the present studies seek to elucidate what motivates people to behave with more versus less procedural fairness. In other words, taking the perspective of those making decisions may suggest a different set of reasons why people (e.g., managers) care about procedural fairness.

Third, trustworthiness is multi-faceted, consisting of ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Ability refers to beliefs about the trustees' knowledge, skills and competencies, and thus the trustees' capability of behaving in a trustworthy fashion. Benevolence is "the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor" (Mayer et al., p. 718), whereas integrity "involves the trustor's perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable" (Mayer et al., p. 719). All three facets of subordinates' trustworthiness were expected to influence their managers' procedural fairness, although not necessarily in the same ways, as we will explain further below.

Theoretical grounding

The specific question examined in the present research is how the perceived trustworthiness of subordinates affects their managers' tendencies to behave with procedural fairness. The studies are grounded more broadly in well-established theory and research on the nature of managerial work, which has shown that managers have both task-oriented and relationship-oriented goals (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1964). Managers are task-oriented in that they focus on the work needed to accomplish their own and their organization's goals efficiently and effectively, and they are relationship-oriented in that they also attend to the social/psychological needs of group members, including their own, such as the need for inclusion.

Subsumed by the more general theorizing of managers as both task-oriented and relationship-oriented, we offer the following reasoning to account for the effects of subordinates' trustworthiness on managers' procedural fairness. Behavior is a function of people's ability and their motivation; therefore, it stands to reason that managers' judgments of their subordinates' trustworthiness are based on their beliefs about their subordinates' ability and motivation to behave in a trustworthy fashion. Ability refers to beliefs about subordinates' knowledge, skills and competencies, and thus their capability of behaving in a trustworthy fashion. Whereas benevolence and integrity differ (in ways to be explained below), both refer to beliefs about whether subordinates intend or are motivated to act in a trustworthy fashion. Next, we offer more specific rationales for the predicted effect of each facet of subordinates' trustworthiness on managers' procedural fairness.

Benevolence

In a recent conceptual analysis designed to stimulate empirical research on the determinants of managers' fairness, Scott et al. (2009) posited that:

"Social exchanges are guided by the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), whereby individuals are motivated to repay in kind those who have helped them. Over time, relationships in which both parties adhere to the norm of reciprocity may develop into high-quality social exchange relationships, which are characterized by mutual respect, trust, and expectations for the continued development of the relationship" (p. 759).

Whereas the above quotation referred to how subordinates may be influenced by their managers' fairness, it is equally applicable to how managers' fairness may be influenced by their subordinates. Moreover, the quotation provides two reasons to hypothesize that subordinates' benevolence will be positively related to managers' procedural fairness. First, looking back at their subordinates' prior behavior, managers may be motivated to show reciprocity towards those subordinates who have shown that they have their managers' best interests at heart, in accordance with social exchange theory (e.g., Blau, 1964). Second, looking towards the future, managers may want to deepen their relationship with those subordinates who managers believe have their best interests at heart. For one thing, managers' effectiveness is likely to be enhanced when they have forged closer relationships with subordinates who share the managers' interests (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1964). Relatedly, managers' power base is maintained or even enhanced when they develop closer connections with subordinates who share their interests.

Hypothesis 1. Managers will exhibit more procedural fairness towards subordinates who they see as having greater benevolence trustworthiness.

Ability

If the reasoning underlying Hypothesis 1 is correct, then ability is expected to moderate the positive relationship between benevolence trustworthiness and managers' procedural fairness. We suggested that the positive effect of direct reports' benevolence on managers' procedural fairness is due to managers wanting to reciprocate towards, as well as to deepen their connection with, subordinates who are perceived to support them. Both of these reasons suggest that the positive relationship between subordinates' benevolence and managers' procedural fairness should be stronger when subordinates are seen as higher in ability. When managers look back at the past behavior of direct reports, the greater motivation to reciprocate they feel towards their more benevolent direct reports may be shown more strongly when the direct reports are higher in ability trustworthiness. This is because the more capable, highly benevolent direct reports may have done

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