

Effects of another person's fair treatment on one's own emotions and behaviors: The moderating role of how much the other cares for you ☆

David De Cremer^{a,*}, Alain Van Hiel^b

^a *Tilburg University, Netherlands*

^b *Ghent University, Belgium*

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Abstract

This research examined whether the extent of fair treatment of another affects one's own reactions and whether helpful and supportive behavior from this other towards oneself moderates this impact. We predicted fair treatment of the other would affect the participant's own emotions and behaviors with respect to a common task, but only if this other was willing to give help and support. In addition, we expected that positive or negative emotions would underlie, respectively, a participant's willingness to cooperate or their willingness to leave the task. Results from a scenario experiment, a cross-sectional survey, and a laboratory experiment supported our predictions. We conclude that how fairly another is treated matters in its effects on one's emotional and behavioral reactions and that procedural justice for others can also be considered important organizational information in shaping one's own feelings and actions for employees.

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Introduction

By now an impressive amount of evidence indicates that within groups and organizations, procedural justice exerts powerful influences on a variety of outcomes, such as emotions and behavior (for a meta-analytic review, see Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Procedural justice refers to authorities' use of correct and fair procedures when making deci-

sions and allocating outcomes (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975); its relative importance has been demonstrated by research indicating how procedural justice interacts with other types of justice (e.g., Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), and how under certain situations it may exert even more powerful effects than outcomes do (e.g., Greenberg, 1996; Tyler, 1994). To date, however, most procedural justice research has been mainly focused on how people evaluate and process their *own* fairness experiences. In fact, this observation motivated Kray and Lind (2002, p. 906) to note that “with a few notable exceptions, the study of perceived justice has been a ‘first-person’ undertaking.”

Thus, although we know a great deal about the reasons why people personally perceive procedures as either fair or unfair, much less attention has been paid to the

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* Corresponding author. Fax: +31 13 466 2067.

E-mail address: d.decremer@uvt.nl (D.De. Cremer).

issue of whether or not people's emotions and behaviors are shaped by the fairness experiences of others (e.g., colleagues or team members). An exception is research focused on how third parties react to justice (Folger, 2001). There are the empirical findings of Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler (1986) and subsequently Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress, and Gee (2002), who showed that individuals will sacrifice even their own resources to punish someone who has been unfair to another; these findings motivated recent work on, for example, the moral dimension of justice (e.g., Cropanzano & Rupp, 2002), which has found that people do seem consider the justice experiences of others. However, as mentioned before, little research has explored this issue in the realm of procedural justice and has not yet identified the circumstances under which these effects are most likely to emerge.

Therefore, here we focused on circumstances under which people's own reactions are most likely to be influenced by how fair the treatment of another person is. In doing this, we explicitly investigated two types of reactions that have been identified and documented as important in the procedural justice literature, but that have received much less attention in studies of how people react, both emotionally and behaviorally, to the fairness experiences of others. Specifically, we examined how much the helping behavior of another affects a person's incorporation of fair or unfair treatment of this other in regulating their own emotional and behavioral reactions toward the enacting authority.

A focus on other's procedural justice experiences

Social exchange theory (e.g., Blau, 1964) is often used as a common lens for viewing and conducting justice research, which explains at least partly why many justice researchers have mainly examined how individuals *personally* experience the fairness of treatment. Within this framework, relationships between followers and authorities are seen as exchanges in which a follower reciprocates a positive personal outcome (e.g., higher salary) by giving positive outcomes to the other party, such as granting power and legitimacy. As a result, researchers were and have been interested in how people evaluate and process their own fairness experiences (see Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997, for an overview).

However, in organizations, people often acquire information from others; therefore, it often is the case that justice information and its effects on the enacting authorities are based on information other than a person's own fairness experiences (cf. van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997). Thus, people are subject to social influences and therefore often engage in social comparisons to construct reality and decide action (Festinger, 1954). This notion of social comparison has heavily influenced distributive justice theories such as

equity theory (Adams, 1965) and relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976).

More recently, however, justice theories such as referent cognitions theory (Folger, 1986) and its successor, fairness theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001), have formed the bases of investigations into the role that social comparisons play in accounting for procedural justice effects. As a result, social and organizational justice research has gradually turned to examining this social influence component in studies of procedural justice (Ambrose, Harland, & Kulik, 1991; Brockner & Greenberg, 1990; Brockner et al., 1994; Kray & Lind, 2002; Lamertz, 2002; Lind, Kray, & Thompson, 1998) and interactions between procedures and outcomes (Grienberger, Rutte, & van Knippenberg, 1997). Many of these studies, however, failed to reveal strong supportive evidence for the effect of others' justice experiences.

Only a limited number of studies have demonstrated that people under certain circumstances might take into account the justice experiences of others in shaping their own reactions toward the enacting authority. Lind et al. (1998) showed that people displayed a strong tendency to use their own experiences to make inferences about the treatment of others, suggesting that personal experience frequently serves as the most important reference point in evaluating procedural justice. Moreover qualified this conclusion by demonstrating that when people do not personally experience any injustice, they do not attend to the treatment of others; however, if they were treated unjustly themselves, they are affected by unjust treatment of others. Further, van den Bos and Lind (2001) showed that a person's reaction was particularly influenced by social reports of another's having received treatment similar to their own, either fair or unfair. As a result, van den Bos and Lind (2001, p. 1333) concluded that "Other-oriented justice effects (...) appear to be every bit as strong as were our self-oriented justice effects"; an observation that recently has received further support from Colquitt's (2004) findings that in teams, the justice experiences of others influence a person's reactions in the context of how fairly they themselves are treated.

It seems, therefore, to be the case that under specific circumstances, the reactions of people toward the enacting authority are influenced by information about how fairly the other is treated. Indeed, the fact that these effects have not been consistent in studies conducted to date suggests that specific situations that facilitate the emergence of these effects need to be identified (note that the deonance model suggests that people may care about other's justice regardless of situation, although it is not clear which ultimate goal underlies such moral virtue orientation; see Gillespie & Greenberg, 2005, for a critical analysis). However, to date, little experimental research has demonstrated an interaction of social

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