



## Reports

## Self-construal level and voice procedures: The individual self as psychological basis for procedural fairness effects <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

In the current article, we investigate the influence of self-construal level on procedural fairness effects, that is, the finding that fair versus unfair procedures influence people's evaluations of their relation with decision-making authorities. In two experiments, we manipulated self-construal level by activating the individual self ("I") or the social self ("We"), and we induced a control condition. Furthermore, we manipulated procedural fairness by granting versus denying participants an opportunity to voice their opinion in a decision-making process. Results consistently revealed stronger procedural fairness effects if the individual self is activated than if the social self is activated. It is concluded that sometimes the individual self, rather than the social self, constitutes the psychological basis for procedural fairness effects.

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### Self-construal level and procedural justice: The individual self as psychological basis for procedural fairness effects

People care deeply about the extent to which they are treated fairly by others. Indeed, it has been suggested that fairness is among the most important norms and values in human society (Folger, 1984). One of the most frequently studied conceptualizations of fairness is procedural justice, which is the extent to which people regard decision-making procedures as fair or unfair (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Accumulating research indicated that perceived procedural justice has positive effects on numerous perceptions, emotions, and behaviors in virtually all domains of social life, including organizations, education, politics, the legal arena, and close relationships (e.g., Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Blader, 2003; Tyler & Lind, 1992; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). One noteworthy finding is that perceived procedural justice influences social evaluations, such as people's evaluations of their relation with decision-makers. In the current article, we refer to these effects of procedural justice on relational treatment evaluations as *procedural fairness effects* (Van Prooijen, Van den Bos, & Wilke, 2002).

An illustration of procedural fairness effects can be found in people's reactions to voice as opposed to no-voice procedures: People generally rate procedures that allow them an opportunity to voice their opinions to be more fair than procedures that deny

them such an opportunity (Folger, 1977; see also Brockner et al., 1998; Lind, Kanfer, & Earley, 1990). In addition, voice procedures positively influence people's evaluations of their relation with decision-making authorities. Notably, when people are granted (as opposed to denied) voice procedures, they perceive the decision-maker as more polite and respectful, and believe the decision-maker to be more objective. Such procedural fairness effects are very robust and easily generalize across methods and samples (e.g., Folger, 1977; Lind et al., 1990; Tyler, 1994; Van den Bos, 2003; Van Prooijen et al., 2008).

Procedural fairness effects often emerge as a result of people's personal experiences of procedural justice and injustice, that is, situations where people *themselves* were treated fairly or unfairly by decision-making authorities (e.g., Lind, Kray, & Thompson, 1998; Van den Bos & Lind, 2001). Hence, it is plausible that the self is involved in the justice judgment process. The self, however, is a broad construct that can operate at various levels. A common distinction of self-construal level is between the individual self and the social self. These levels of self-construal have been argued to operate relatively independent from each other (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Gaertner, Sedikides, Vevea, & Iuzzini, 2002; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). The individual self is the part of the self-concept that differentiates the self from others and stresses the individual's uniqueness, and the social self is the part of the self-concept that assimilates the self with others and stresses similarities with other people. As such, these levels of self-construal are closely associated with cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991). Both self-conceptualizations are an integral part of people's self-concept and can be made more or less accessible through contextual factors (Brewer & Gardner, 1996;

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Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Stapel & Koomen, 2001). We propose here that the precise relations between these various levels of self-construal and procedural fairness effects are as yet poorly understood. The current research investigates the influence of self-construal level on procedural fairness effects.

### Self-construal level and procedural fairness effects

Experiences of procedural justice and injustice are products of people's interactions with other people (e.g., Huo, Smith, Tyler, & Lind, 1996; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Smith, Tyler, Huo, Ortiz, & Lind, 1998; Tyler & Blader, 2003; Van Prooijen, Van den Bos, & Wilke, 2004). This social nature of procedural justice has led researchers to conclude that it is the social self that shapes procedural fairness effects. For instance, De Cremer and Tyler (2005) reasoned that "...the fairness of enacted procedures communicates information relevant to the *social self*, and, in turn, motivates group members to engage in cooperative behavior aimed at promoting the group's interest" (p. 155; italics added). Indeed, empirical research established that procedural justice leads people to support the collective interest at the expense of immediate self-interest (De Cremer, 2002). In the present contribution, however, we argue that these findings do not automatically imply that procedural fairness effects originate from concerns that are associated with the social self. Instead, we propose that in many situations procedural fairness effects are shaped by concerns that are associated with the individual self. The reason for this can be found in research findings that fair procedures are expected to produce both instrumental and social rewards. Voice procedures raise outcome expectancies (Thibaut & Walker, 1975), and more importantly, voice procedures inform recipients that they are respected, have high status, and are regarded as fully-fledged members of their community (Tyler & Blader, 2003; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Empirical research indeed confirms relations between procedural justice and feelings of status or belongingness (De Cremer, 2002; Tyler, 1994; Tyler, DeGoey, & Smith, 1996; Van Prooijen et al., 2002, 2004).

Recipients are likely to value the rewards that are associated with procedural justice (e.g., respect, admiration) because of the positive implications for their own feelings of self-worth (Lind et al., 1998; Van Prooijen et al., 2008). Of particular importance to the present purposes, it stands to reason that people want to receive the rewards of justice for who they are, because of their own qualities, and because of their unique contributions to their community. Hence, it is plausible that the desire to obtain the rewards that are associated with procedural justice originate from the need to validate one's unique individual attributes. Furthermore, it must be noted that such validation of one's individual attributes may be particularly relevant when responding to voice procedures; after all, voice procedures imply that recipients are asked for their individual and unique input in the decision-making process. These considerations suggest that it sometimes is the individual self, and not the social self, that constitutes the psychological basis for procedural fairness effects. In correspondence with this idea, a meta-analysis by Gaertner et al. (2002) reveals that the individual self is people's primary basis for self-definition, and that the individual self is much more sensitive to external enhancements or threats than the social self. The Gaertner et al. findings fit the current propositions to the extent that voice procedures are rewarding for the individual and no-voice procedures are threatening to the individual.

If the underlying motivations which shape procedural fairness effects indeed reflect concerns that pertain to the individual self, then it is likely that people are particularly sensitive to procedural justice when the individual self is activated. Activation of the individual self may thus amplify procedural fairness effects. To inves-

tigate this hypothesis, in two experiments participants were either primed with the individual self by activating the word "I" or with the social self by activating the word "We". These priming procedures were developed in previous research, and have been shown to successfully elicit responses that are associated with the individual self versus the social self (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gardner et al., 1999; Stapel & Koomen, 2001). Furthermore, we added a control condition to our self-construal activation manipulation. This enabled us to establish in what priming condition procedural fairness effects are most strongly affected, while simultaneously allowing for comparison with related procedural justice research. Following the self-construal manipulation, we induced a manipulation of voice versus no-voice procedures within an experimental setup that has been validated in previous research (e.g., Van den Bos, 2003; Van den Bos & Lind, 2001; Van Prooijen et al., 2008). Given that our line of reasoning focuses on the implications of procedural justice for how people perceive the self in relation to others, the main dependent variables in the experiments were relational treatment evaluations, that is, evaluations of one's relation with decision-makers (e.g., Huo et al., 1996; Smith et al., 1998; Tyler & Lind, 1992; Van Prooijen et al., 2002). We predicted that voice versus no-voice procedures would exert stronger effects on relational treatment evaluations among participants who were primed with the word "I" than among participants who were primed with the word "We".

### Experiment 1

#### Method

#### Participants and design

The hypothesis was tested in a 3 (self construal activation: I versus we versus control)  $\times$  2 (procedure: voice versus no-voice) factorial design. A total of 115 participants (68 men, 47 women, varying in age from 18 to 39 years) were recruited in the restaurants of the VU University Amsterdam, and were assigned randomly to conditions (18–20 participants per cell). The experiment was followed by another, unrelated experiment. Together the experiments lasted 45 min and participants were paid 5 euros for participation.

#### Procedure

Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants were led to separate cubicles. In the cubicles, participants found computer equipment, which was used to present the stimulus information and to register the data. The experiment was introduced as a study on how people perform tasks. Participants were informed that they would perform a writing task during the experiment. Additionally, participants were led to believe that all computers in the lab were interconnected, and that the experimenter, who was supposed to be in one of the cubicles, could send messages to all participants during the experiment (in reality, all stimulus information was pre-programmed; a procedure none of the participants objected to upon debriefing). Finally, participants were informed that a lottery with a prize of 50 euros would take place, and that the experimenter would allocate a total of 200 lottery tickets among all participants. After the writing task, a number of lottery tickets would be allocated to the participant.

Participants then started with the writing task, for which they found a piece of paper and a pen next to the computer. Participants in the I condition were asked to write seven sentences about "who I am", and were instructed to use one of the following words in every sentence: I, me, my, myself, mine (Stapel & Koomen, 2001). Participants in the we condition were asked to write seven sentences about "who we are", and were instructed to use one of

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