

# Status characteristics and reward expectations: A test of a theory of justice in two cultures <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

We present a model, the equity–equality equilibrium model, for fairness judgments of reward distributions in work groups. The model is based on reward expectations theory [Berger, Joseph, Fişek, M. Hamit, Norman, Robert Z., Wagner, David G., 1985. Formation of reward expectations in status situations. In: Berger, J., Zelditch, M. (Eds.), *Status, Rewards, and Influence*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp. 215–261] and general considerations of equity theory [Adams, J.S., 1965. Inequity in social exchange. In: Berkowitz, L. (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. Academic Press, New York; Walster, Elaine, Ellen, Berscheid, Walster, G. William, 1976. New directions in equity research. In: Berkowitz, L., Walster, E. (Eds.), *Equity Theory Towards a General Theory of Social Interaction*. Academic Press, New York, pp. 226–235], and generates precise predictions for what respondents will allocate as the most “fair” distribution of rewards across members of work groups. We test our model using data from two different countries, the United States of America and Turkey, and find that it fits the data well, providing an empirical support for reward expectations theory. The model also provides a measure of where an individual making a fairness judgment stands, on a continuum of allocation strategy, running from equality to equity. We explore how this measure varies across groups, discuss its relationship to justice-relevant variables, and consider some implications of the model for understanding allocation behaviors.

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## 1. Introduction

Justice and fairness have been issues of major concern for philosophers, starting with Plato and Aristotle, and continuing to Rawls (1999) in our own day. Social psychologists are relative newcomers to the study of

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justice. Homans (1950) and Blau (1964) probably provide the earliest systematic social psychological analyses of the topic. However, work in this area has continued since their time and there currently exists considerable accumulation of knowledge regarding justice processes. Unlike philosophers, we are not concerned with answering questions about what is (and what is not) just or fair. We conceptualize those as concrete, historical, issues. Rather, we seek to identify what is *thought* to be just and fair by people.

For the social psychologist, one of the more interesting kinds of justice is *distributive justice*. Social life necessarily involves the sharing, or distribution, of material and honorific resources among individuals within all kinds of collectivities. Distributive justice researchers are concerned with identifying which distributions of resources are perceived as fair, and which as unfair, by the members or observers of a given collectivity. Would it be fair, for example, for the foreman of a group of workers in a machine shop to make 50% more wages than the line workers? Could he/she be over or under rewarded? Would the judgments of the foreman and the line workers be different? Would the gender and/or ethnicity of the foreman and the workers make a difference? How such judgments are produced are of intrinsic theoretical interest, and also of practical importance. As Homans put it, “distributive justice does not interest us just for its own sake. It interests us because it is [also] a fertile source of hostility between persons and groups” (Homans, 1974, p. 268).

In this paper we are concerned with a particular theory of justice—reward expectations theory (Berger et al., 1985). It is mathematically formulated and allows for precise numerical predictions of the *fair distribution* of rewards over a number of individuals in a task situation, based on those actors’ standing of various *status characteristics* and *abilities*. Fairness can be in the perceptions of either the group members themselves, or in those of outside observers, given that both share the same set of social values and norms. The initial theory (Berger et al., 1985) has generated additional theoretical development (Berger et al., 1998), and empirical tests (Bierhoff et al., 1986; Stewart and Moore, 1992; Wagner, 1990, 1995; Hysom, 2003).<sup>1</sup> These empirical tests, other than the Wagner studies, are concerned with one aspect of the theory—the “reverse process” which deals with how given reward distributions affect performance expectations. The Wagner studies which actually deal how expectations determine allocative behaviors are of relatively limited scope—both involve two-person groups where actors are discriminated by two status characteristics, gender and an ability characteristic. While these tests provide empirical support for the theory, it is difficult to say that the formulation has been adequately tested. We intend to remedy this situation. We use data (individual level allocation preferences) from two samples, drawn from two quite different national cultures—the United States of America, and Turkey.

It is generally accepted that justice phenomena are culture-dependent to a large extent (Fischer and Smith, 2003), so that to claim any generality for a theory of justice it needs to be tested in a number of different cultures.<sup>2</sup> We believe our test of the theory will both constitute a strict test of the core assertions of the theory, and also demonstrate that it is, at least, valid in more than one culture. We should also note that cross-cultural research on judgments of fairness of rewards has been of considerable interest to researchers of organizational behavior, particularly since the advent of globalization (see Fischer and Smith, 2003 for a survey of this literature). Cultural differences in judgments of fairness of rewards are of particular interest to multicultural organizations which need to motivate employees from many different cultures.

We carried out the study in two quite different cultures, United States and Turkey, which are familiar to the researchers. The United States is a Western and modern culture, where Turkey is a non-Western, mostly traditional culture. Of particular interest are cultural differences in individualism vs. collectivism orientations (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). The relationship of individualism/collectivism and justice judgments has been of interest to both cross-cultural psychologists and management researchers. There is a considerable cross-cultural psychology literature on individualistic cultures preferring the equity norm and collectivistic cultures preferring the equality norm (see Kağıtçibasi, 1977, 2005 for a review of this literature). However, a recent meta-

<sup>1</sup> Another study by Harrod (1980) also provides empirical support for the theory, but as it predates the formulation we cannot consider it to be a test of the theory.

<sup>2</sup> Jasso (2005) has actually developed a sophisticated conceptual framework for cross-cultural studies of justice. However we do not make use of this framework as our cross-cultural interests are quite limited and do not require a refined conceptual framework, we merely wish to show that the model we present fits data from quite different cultures.

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