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Fair process revisited: Differential effects of interactional and procedural justice in the presence of social comparison information

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Abstract

The competing views of fairness theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998, 2001) and fairness heuristic theory (Van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997) were tested by studying the effects of interactional (IJ), procedural (PJ), and distributive justice (knowledge of others' outcomes [OO]) upon evaluations of outcome fairness and customer satisfaction. The participants, 369 undergraduates, were randomly allocated to scenario-based experimental conditions. A 2 (IJ) × 2 (PJ) × 4 (OO) MANOVA and stepdown analyses provided evidence of "fair process" across all levels of distributive justice for outcome fairness ($p < .001$) and satisfaction ($p < .001$), but only in relation to the effects of interactional justice. No such effects were found for procedural justice. Implications for the development of justice theory are discussed.

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Justice is a central concept in contemporary social and organizational psychology, with many writers advocating the pursuit of justice on both economic and ethical grounds (Bazerman, 1993; Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997). Two main dimensions of justice are generally distinguished. Distributive justice concerns the fairness of ends or outcomes, and procedural justice relates to the means used to achieve those ends (Greenberg, 1987). Some authors (e.g., Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997; Greenberg & McCarty, 1990) further divide procedural justice into: (a) structural elements, or formal aspects of the context in which an interaction takes place (e.g., whether someone has the opportunity for input ["voice"] into a decision) and (b) interactional elements, or aspects of the context involving the treat-

ment of individuals during an interaction (e.g., courtesy, respect). However, other writers view interactional factors as a third, entirely independent dimension of justice (see Bies, 1987, 2001; Bies & Moag, 1986; Korsgaard, Roberson, & Rymph, 1998).

This paper provides evidence relevant to the theoretical differentiation of structural and interactional elements of procedural justice. It also clarifies one of the most robust findings in social and organizational psychology—the "fair process effect". This phrase refers to the tendency for outcome evaluations and subsequent behavior to be influenced by perceptions of procedural justice (see Van den Bos et al., 1997). If people consider a procedure to be fair, then they are often more accepting of its consequences (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Alternate views of the fair process effect are provided by two contemporary theories of justice: fairness heuristic theory (Van den Bos et al., 1997; Van den Bos, Wilke, Lind, & Vermunt, 1998), and fairness theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998, 2001). In what follows, the two theories and their rival predictions are presented, and the rationale for our test of these predictions is developed.

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Fairness heuristic theory

Fairness heuristic theory offers one explanation of the fair process effect. In outlining this theory, Van den Bos et al. (1997) argue that information relating to procedural fairness may be easier to interpret than information relating to the fairness of outcomes. These authors claim that people seldom have access to information about other people's outcomes, so they must rely instead on information that *is* available, namely information regarding process justice (Van den Bos et al., 1997, 1998). Procedural information is thus used, in a heuristic manner, to shape impressions of overall justice. When information regarding the outcomes received by others *is* available, however, that information is given greater weight than procedural information in the formation of justice evaluations (Van den Bos et al., 1997). Indeed, Van den Bos and his colleagues maintain that when social comparison equity information is available, "one does not need procedural fairness to construct outcome judgments" (Van den Bos et al., 1997, p. 1043 [italics added]).

In a test of fairness heuristic theory, Van den Bos et al. (1997) exposed students to both procedural and social comparison information. Using computer screens to display hypothetical scenarios, the researchers manipulated procedural justice (voice versus no voice) and awareness of another person's outcome. As predicted, fair process effects were found only in conditions where participants could not rely on information regarding the other's outcome. When social comparison information was available, procedural justice did not significantly affect fairness or satisfaction ratings. Other, similar studies, using both scenario and *in vivo* methods, supported these findings (Van den Bos et al., 1997, 1998).

Thus, Van den Bos et al. (1997) concluded that outcome evaluations are affected more by the fairness of procedures when information regarding the outcomes of others is lacking than when such information is available. Van den Bos et al. tempered their conclusions by emphasizing that there may be "some, as yet unidentified conditions" (p. 1043) where social comparison equity information is present, yet strong effects of process on outcome evaluations occur.

Fairness theory

A different view of these matters is offered by Folger and Cropanzano's (1998, 2001) fairness theory. These theorists emphasize the cognitive mechanism of "counterfactual thinking," or thinking about "what might have been" (Roese & Olson, 1997, p. 1). According to fairness theory, when people evaluate the fairness of someone's actions, they imagine possible alternative actions and assess whether any of those actions

would have been preferable. If an aggrieved party believes that someone clearly could and should have behaved differently, then the "wrongdoer" may be seen as guilty of unfair treatment, but if the wrongdoer had no apparent alternative courses of action, or the behavior was unintentional, then negative reactions are mitigated (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998).

Central to our research is fairness theory's claim that interactional justice may affect outcome evaluations more strongly than either procedural or distributive justice. According to Folger and Cropanzano (1998), potential ambiguity exists for evaluating actions on the basis of procedural structures and tangible outcomes. However, violations of interactional justice norms often seem to be deliberate and freely chosen, rather than the result of a mistake or coercion. This suggests that interactional justice may have a pervasive direct effect on outcome evaluations, rather than the conditional effects typically found in earlier justice research. Folger and Cropanzano also highlight the importance of separating interactional justice and procedural justice because "they might implicate blame in different fashions and perhaps to different degrees" (1998, p. 37). To date, however, it appears that their theory has not been tested.

Rationale for the current study

Both fairness heuristic theory and fairness theory maintain that process issues affect outcome evaluations, although the former theory claims that the strength of this effect varies with the availability of social comparison information. Additional research is required to test these competing theories. Although Van den Bos et al. (1997, 1998) have amassed considerable evidence in favor for their fairness heuristic theory, two limitations of these studies suggest that it may be premature to accept the theory. First, Van den Bos et al.'s operationalization of procedural justice was exclusively structural in nature. Participants in their experiments were given either "voice" or "no voice," via a computer interface. There was no direct human contact, so issues of interactional justice were effectively eliminated. This focus on just one element of procedural justice leaves open the issue of whether their findings can be generalized to other contexts and forms of procedural justice. A second limitation involves the measurement of the dependent variables in research by Van den Bos and his colleagues. Outcome fairness and satisfaction were each measured with a single, "global" item, despite the clear advantages of using multiple-item scales (De Vaus, 1995).

Given these limitations of Van den Bos et al.'s (1997, 1998) studies, there is a need for research that operationalizes procedural justice in interactional, rather than structural terms, and which uses multiple-item scales to

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