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Assimilation and contrast in organizational justice: The role of primed mindsets in the psychology of the fair process effect

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the psychology of the fair process effect (the frequently replicated finding that perceived procedural fairness positively affects people's reactions). It is argued that when people have received an outcome they usually assimilate their ratings of outcome fairness and affect toward their experiences of procedural fairness. As a result, ratings show fair process effects. It is also possible, however, that when people have received their outcome they compare this outcome to the procedure they experienced: Is the outcome better or worse than the procedure? A result of this comparison process may be that contrast effects are found such that higher levels of procedural fairness lead to more negative ratings of outcome fairness and affect. Research findings suggest that when comparison goals have been primed, contrast effects indeed can be found. The implications for the psychology of the fair process effect and organizational behavior are discussed. © 2002 Elsevier Science (USA). All rights reserved.

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Justice is a key issue for understanding organizational behavior (Cropanzano & Folger, 1989, 1991; Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg, 1990, 1993). One of the most important contributions of the work on organizational justice, and one of the most frequently replicated findings in organizational behavior, has been the discovery that perceived procedural fairness positively affects people's reactions (Folger, 1977; Folger, Rosenfield, Grove, & Corkran, 1979; Tyler, 1990; Walker, LaTour, Lind, & Thibaut, 1974). These fair process effects have been found on people's reactions to procedures received from various authorities, such as organizational authorities (Folger & Konovsky, 1989), police authorities (Tyler & Folger, 1980), political authorities (Tyler & DeGoe, 1995), and authorities in court trials (Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, & De Vera Park, 1993). Furthermore, as has been noted by Lind and Tyler (1988), an exciting aspect of research on the fair process effect is that the effect has been found on very different

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human reactions (for overviews, see Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992). This is important because it suggests that fair process studies may have substantial implications for a multitude of domains of human behavior. In the current paper, therefore, I try to show effects of perceived procedural fairness on different human reactions. More specifically, I investigate fair process effects on ratings of outcome fairness and negative affect.

An illustration of previous research in which fair process effects were reported on outcome fairness judgments can be found in Van den Bos, Bruins, Wilke, and Dronkert (1999). Participants in the second experiment presented in that article completed an estimation test, consisting of 20 estimation items. The procedure manipulation was such that the experimenter graded all 20 items (accurate procedure) or only 1 of the 20 items (inaccurate procedure). Main dependent variables were participants' judgments of fairness of an outcome they subsequently received (for details, see Van den Bos et al., 1999). As expected, participants judged the accurate procedure to be more fair than the inaccurate procedure. More interestingly, in the conditions that are relevant for the current purposes, fair process effects were found such that participants judged their outcome to be more fair following the fair procedure as opposed to the unfair procedure.

An example of research in which fair process effects were found on ratings of negative affect is the experiment reported by Vermunt, Wit, Van den Bos, and Lind (1996). In this study, participants completed an estimation test consisting of 10 items, and the procedure manipulation was such that the experimenter graded 8 of the 10 items (slightly inaccurate procedure) or 1 of the 10 items (very inaccurate procedure). The fair process effects that were found in the experiment included that participants showed higher ratings of negative affect following the very inaccurate procedure as opposed to the slightly inaccurate procedure.

Thus, numerous studies show the robustness of the fair process effect. Indeed, the fair process effect is one of the most important factors that has led some procedural justice researchers to conclude that perceived procedural fairness may affect people's reactions more strongly than outcome fairness perceptions (see, e.g., Lind & Tyler, 1988, p. 1). This led to the situation that procedural justice research nowadays tends to focus on one aspect of the psychological process leading to fairness and other judgments: procedures. Distributive justice researchers, on the other hand, also tend to focus on one aspect of the fairness judgment process: outcomes. Some researchers even suggest that outcomes may be more important for people's fairness judgments than procedures (e.g., Lerner & Whitehead, 1980). Thus, both procedural and distributive justice research tend to focus on only one aspect of the fairness judgment process, at the expense of other important concepts. As several authors have pointed out, it is now time to integrate the procedural and distributive justice domains (e.g., Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; Cropanzano & Folger, 1991; Greenberg, 1990; Van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997a).

One of the reasons why it is important to study fair process effects is that this may further the integration of the procedural and distributive justice domains. More specifically, it will be argued here that if we want to understand the psychology of fair process effects we have to assess how people may react to the outcomes they have received. In other words, the effects of perceived procedural fairness depend on how people react toward their outcomes.

In this paper, I will try to provide new insights into the psychology of the fair process effect (for overviews of earlier explanations, see, e.g., Greenberg & Folger, 1983; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Van den Bos, Lind, & Wilke, 2001). The contribution I am trying to make to the literature is testing a specific set of conditions under which the fair process effect—a well-established finding in the literature—might be reversed. Previous studies have shown some conditions under which reversals of the fair process effect can be found. For example, Folger's (1977) research on the frustration

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