ISJR - International Society for Justice Research

ISJR-Newsletter

1st Issue; June 2001, edited by Ron Cohen

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Issue Focus

Justice Concerns and Affirmative Action

Ramona Bobocel, University of Waterloo

Despite many well-intentioned efforts to remedy social injustice, a paradox exists: Often the policies designed to redress injustice are themselves criticized as unfair and, in turn, they are opposed.   Consider the case of affirmative action. Some people support affirmative action as a means of redressing social injustice. Others oppose it on the grounds that it is unfair. Such objections based on unfairness or injustice are often discounted by advocates of affirmative action, who suggest that these objections are a cover up for prejudice, self-interest, or other motives related to maintaining the status quo. In other words, it is often suggested that people use the claim of injustice to justify, in a more socially acceptable fashion, their opposition to affirmative action, which in reality derives from motives other than genuine concerns about justice.

Thus, the question arises: Is opposition to affirmative action that purportedly derives from peopleÕs concerns about justice instead driven by other motives, such as prejudice? If so, then this would cast doubt on the validity of the paradox noted above. That is, we could attribute people's justice-based objections to motivations other than their concerns about the possible violation of valued justice principles. This is an important issue because researchers' interpretations of the causes of people's opposition ultimately influences how they study attitudes in this domain and how society develops and implements policies designed to redress injustice. Over the past eight years or so, my students, Mark Zanna, and I have been investigating this question.

Years ago, Mel Lerner advanced the idea that people's concerns about justice and injustice are primary motivators of behavior (e.g., see Lerner, 1977; Lerner & Miller, 1978). Put differently, Lerner argued that people's concerns about justice are not inevitably reducible to other motives, such as self-interest (e.g., see a recent review and discussion of this issue by Leo Montada, in press).   Drawing on Lerner's conception of justice as a primary motive, we have similarly argued that fairness considerations can be a source of opposition to affirmative action in their own right--that is, apart from the role of prejudice.

In an initial series of studies, our goal was to directly test whether people's concerns about justice can indeed be genuine determinants of their attitudes toward affirmative action, or whether fairness-based objections are necessarily rooted in people's prejudices toward those who purportedly benefit most from the policy (e.g., women and visible minorities). We reasoned that, to the extent that justice concerns are a genuine source of opposition to affirmative action, people with a strong (versus weak) preference for, or endorsement of, specific principles of justice (e.g., the merit principle and the consistency principle) should be more opposed to an affirmative action policy, but only when the policy explicitly violates the relevant justice principle. Moreover, this pattern should be independent of any effects of participants' prejudice levels.

The results from a series of studies (reported in Bobocel, Son Hing, Davey, Stanley, & Zanna, 1998) were precisely in line with this reasoning. We first measured University of Waterloo students' (a) endorsement of the merit principle of distributive justice (i.e., the idea that outcomes ought to be distributed on the basis of merit; see

Davey, Bobocel, Son Hing, & Zanna, 1999); (b) their endorsement of the consistency principle of procedural justice (i.e., the idea that decision-making procedures ought to treat people identically), and (c) their prejudice. About one month later, we assessed their attitudes toward three different affirmative action policies under the guise of an unrelated corporate survey. When participants evaluated an affirmative action policy that, by our design, violated the merit principle--it gave preference to target-group members who are relatively less qualified than White men--participants' endorsement of the merit principle was a unique predictor of opposition. When they evaluated an affirmative action policy that violated the consistency principle of procedural justice but not the merit principle of distributive justice (it gave preference to target-group members only in cases of 'tied' merit), participants' endorsement of the consistency principle predicted opposition.

Prejudice did not contribute significantly to opposition to either of our justice-violating programs. This is because participants who were relatively less prejudiced were equally opposed to these policies (in particular to the merit-violating policy) as were their more prejudiced counterparts.

In contrast, when participants evaluated a policy that upheld both the consistency and merit principles (the policy involved the introduction of programs like flex time that could benefit everyone, including target-group members), as expected, participants' justice values no longer predicted opposition. In this case, prejudice uniquely predicted opposition such that more prejudiced people were more opposed. Follow-up mediation analyses revealed that prejudiced individuals (compared with less prejudiced individuals) were more opposed to the justice-upholding policy because they in fact construed it as justice violating. This latter finding is consistent with the idea that, for prejudiced people, justice concerns may indeed serve as a justification for opposition (see also Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Murrell, Dietz-Uhler, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Drout, 1994). It is noteworthy that in related follow-up studies, we have replicated the effect of prejudice on people's evaluations of a 'typical workplace affirmative action policy' for which we presented no further details.

Taken together, our findings from these studies are in line with the notion that justice concerns and prejudice are independent sources of opposition to affirmative action. Whereas it is true that prejudiced people may use the claim of injustice as a cover up for their opposition, our data suggest that it is not the case that all justice-based opposition merely reflects prejudice.

Although people's concerns about justice may sometimes lead them to oppose some affirmative action programs, we have reasoned more recently that it should also be possible to derive conditions under which the same motivation would reduce opposition. In particular, if people object to social policies that violate certain justice norms as a result of their endorsement of those norms, then opposition might be reduced under conditions that highlight unfairness in the status quo. For instance, if the instruments used to select people for jobs in an organization are biased against certain group members, then this should offend people who most care about justice. Under these conditions, we have reasoned that people who are particularly concerned about justice could face a conflict: All else equal, they will oppose a merit-violating policy or a consistency-violating policy because these policies offend their justice principles; however, the existence of bias in the workplace also offends their justice principles. We have reasoned that, under these conditions, people's "usual" objections to the policies due to their general justice values could be overridden by their beliefs about the more proximal unfairness in the status quo. Indeed, on the basis of theorizing by Faye Crosby (e.g., Crosby, 1994), it is possible that, within the larger context of an unfair system, people who are most concerned about justice could actually perceive affirmative action as justice restoring.

In subsequent research, we have directly investigated these ideas. For example, in her dissertation research, Leanne Son Hing examined the joint effect of participants' perceptions of discrimination in how target-group members' merit is assessed in work organizations and their preference for the merit principle in determining attitudes toward the merit-violating policy that we had used in our initial research (these studies are reported in Son Hing, Bobocel, & Zanna, 2001). In several studies, we found the expected interaction. When people perceived little discrimination--naturally in some studies or via experimental induction in other studies--we replicated our past findings: The more participants endorsed the merit principle, the more negative were their attitudes toward the merit-violating policy.

However, when participants perceived high workplace discrimination, our previous effect was mitigated. Stated differently, the interaction revealed that, among people who strongly endorse the merit principle, opposition to the merit-violating policy was significantly reduced when they perceived high (versus low) workplace discrimination. Furthermore, the data suggest that this is because, in the context of high workplace discrimination, people who strongly value the merit principle perceived that the policy was more likely to identify deserving target-group members.

In a second set of experiments I presented at the ISJR meeting in Tel Aviv last September (Bobocel, Holmvall, Zdaniuk, & Son Hing, 2000), my students and I have examined the effects of a similar situational variable on people's reactions to the violation of procedural consistency. For example, in one study, Caucasian participants were led to believe that they and an accented Asian confederate (ostensibly another participant) would work on a cognitive ability test and would be paid according to their performance. In the disadvantage condition, the Asian confederate appeared to have difficulty reading English (she asked for the meaning of several words on a pre-test completed in the presence of participants and always took 5 minutes longer to complete the pre-test); in the no disadvantage condition, these events did not transpire. The experimenter then announced that the confederate would receive extra time and a dictionary for the cognitive ability test, thereby violating the norm of procedural consistency.

Triangulating on the previous study, in the control condition, participants who strongly endorse the consistency principle (measured one month earlier) were more opposed to the inconsistent treatment than were those who weakly endorse this principle. However, when the confederate was disadvantaged, the effect was mitigated. In other words, the data revealed that participants who most strongly value consistent treatment were significantly less opposed to the violation of consistent treatment when the confederate was clearly disadvantaged. Mediation analyses revealed that this is because, when the confederate was disadvantaged, participants perceived that inconsistent treatment was more likely to produce a fair distribution of pay.

Taken as a whole, our research program suggests that people's justice-based objections to affirmative action can be genuine, but that they are not inevitable. Our data to date suggest that, by highlighting the existence of injustice in the status quo, opposition can be reduced among people who might otherwise object on the grounds that a policy violates principles of justice that they value.

In closing, I would suggest that both opposition to and support for policies like affirmative action may stem, in part, from the same underlying motivation: a fundamental concern for justice. Furthermore, by recognizing that fairness-based objections to policies aimed at redressing social injustice are not necessarily reducible to other motivations such as prejudice against potential beneficiaries, investigators should be better positioned to delineate the conditions that could help to

reduce some of the backlash associated with these policies. In turn, this should help both to close the growing chasm between proponents and opponents of affirmative action and to foster new research directions. It is my hope that, by adopting more complex theoretical approaches in the study of attitudes toward affirmative action, investigators will gain a better understanding of how we as a society might maintain people's sense of justice at the same time as we attempt to redress injustice.

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The Social Psychology of Fairness Judgments

Kees van den Bos, Utrecht University

It should not come as a big surprise to the readers of this Newsletter that fairness plays a key role in people's lives and that a substantial body of research has shown that peopleâs beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors are affected greatly by whether they feel they have been treated fairly or unfairly (for overviews, see, e.g., Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992).

Because norms and values of fairness and justice play such a substantial role in guiding social behavior, fairness judgments have received considerable attention from social psychologists. Over the last 25 years the bulk of work on the social psychology of fairness has focused on establishing empirically the consequences of fair or unfair treatment (for reviews see, e.g., Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Social psychologists now have lots of evidence of the importance of fairness issues in various real-world settings, and they have identified a variety of ways that fairness affects people's reactions and behaviors. In other words, researchers know quite a lot about what the effects of social fairness are.

However, these advances may have been achieved at the expense of deeper insights into what we think are the two most fundamental questions in the psychology of social fairness: why people care about fairness and how fairness judgments are formed.
 Common denominator for our research program is that relatively little is known about the why and how of perceived fairness and that hard empirical data can be used to answer these two questions. We are not alone in this conclusion. Tyler, for example, has proposed that psychologists should explore why fairness matters (Tyler, 1997; Tyler, DeGoey, & Smith, 1996). Ambrose and Kulik (2001) recently have argued that little is known about the processes by which fairness judgments are formed. Here we present an overview of the empirical work (largely theory-driven laboratory experiments) that our research group has conducted on issues surrounding the how and why of fairness judgments. First, we will discuss our conceptualization of fairness. After this we make some notes on the methodology used in the majority of the research projects to be reviewed here. We close with an overview of the research projects.

Fairness Judgments
Fairness, as we psychologists study it, is an idea that exists within the minds of individuals (Adams, 1965; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997). This subjective sense of what is fair or unfair is the focus of the psychology of fairness, and can be contrasted with objective principles of fairness and justice that are studied by philosophers, among others (for an overview, see Cohen, 1986). Unlike the objective principles of fairness and justice, subjective feelings about fairness and unfairness are not necessarily justified by reference to the external standards of what is fair and just proposed by philosophical (and other normative) theories of justice. Rather the concern of psychologists is what people think is fair and unfair.

Thus, we agree with Mikula and Wenzel (2000) that the emphasis of psychologists on fairness judgments is important because abstract philosophical principles of justice allow for a diversity of different translations into concrete terms. To be sure, judgments of fairness and justice may be socially shared, but such a consensus only indicates grounds for intersubjectivity, not for objectivity. Thus, as we approach them, fairness judgments are always subjective judgments and the aim of our psychological study of social justice is to understand the causes and consequences of subjective fairness judgments (cf. Mikula & Wenzel, 2000; Tyler et al., 1997).

It is important to emphasize here that judgments of what people judge to be fair and judgments of what they consider to be just or morally right might differ substantially.

"Justice" and "morality" are often seen as more formal terms, and they carry a connotation of legal authority and ethical rules that is precisely what we do not mean in most psychological theorizing and research on the topic. In contrast "fairness" better connotes the subjective, ready judgment that is and has long been the true topic of psychological study. We have the impression that participants in research studies find it easier and more relevant to provide judgments of fairness than judgments of justice or morality. This is the reason, we assume, that most social psychologists in our field usually ask people to rate fairness rather than to rate justice or morality (see, e.g., the list of measures in the Appendix of Tyler & Lind, 1992), and this is the reason that we prefer to use the label "fairness judgments" rather than "justice judgments" or "judgments of morality." "Fairness judgments" simply reflects better both common research practices and the core belief under study. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that social psychologists usually call this area "the psychology of social justice," we will speak here of the "psychology of fairness judgments," and we will talk about fairness judgments as both our major theoretical construct and as what is being measured in our studies.

Methodology
We want to make a point here on the methodology used in most (but not all!) of the projects to be reviewed here. Because much of the existing empirical literature on the psychology of fairness has employed correlational research methods within real-life situations, social psychologists know quite a lot of the effects fairness judgments can have on people in a multitude of situations. However, this knowledge may have been achieved at the expense of thorough insights into the two most fundamental issues of social justice: why do people care about fairness and how are fairness judgments formed. We propose that the fundamentals of the why and how of social justice are probably better investigated by means of research methods that are best equipped to study fundamental issues: laboratory experiments. We therefore argue that it is important to do fundamental research by means of laboratory methodologies and that laboratory experiments serve an essential, crucial role in the study of social fairness (Van den Bos, 2001a).

Overview of Research Group
Our research group is organized within the Kurt Lewin Institute, the Dutch national research school of social psychology and its applications. Having organized our research in this nation-wide institution (and the fact that I have moved around a lot, the last couple of years) implies that our research group is not located at one university.

Since this year I work at the Department of Social and Organizational Psychology at Utrecht University. My own main research interests include the question why fairness is important for people. Together with Allan Lind (Duke University), I argue that fairness matters so much because it helps people to deal with uncertainty. As social or cognitive conditions arise that prompt concerns about uncertainty, we suggest, people become especially attentive to the information they need to form fairness judgments, because solid, firmly constructed fairness judgments either remove uncertainty or alleviate much of the discomfort that uncertainty would otherwise generate.

The foundations for this model of uncertainty management by means of fairness judgments are laid out in a recent publication in Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (Van den Bos, 2001b) and a chapter that will appear in next year's Advances in Experimental Social Psychology (Van den Bos & Lind, in press--available on request at k.vandenbos@fss.uu.nl).
Following this line of research, Marjolein Maas at our department will directly investigate how people use experiences of fair and unfair events to cope with

uncertainty.

Susuanne L. Peters at our department is working together with Jan Fekke Ybema (formerly at the Free University Amsterdam) and D. Ramona Bobocel (University of Waterloo). Susanne's research focuses on what people do when their considerations of fairness conflict with other important social motives, most notably self-interest. Other research projects I am involved in include:

- anchoring effects on the fairness judgment process (together with Jenny Eaglestone from our department and Rob Folger, Elizabeth Umphress, John Burrows, Julie Gee, and Jim Lavelle from Tulane),

- research on the relationship between affect and fairness judgments (together with Marjolein Maas, Annemarie van Bruinisse, Floor Zandee, Aernout Koning, and Jaap Lanc?e, from our department, and Ismintha Waldring and GŸn Semin from the Free University Amsterdam),

- research on the positive aspects unfairness may have on people's reactions (together with Jan Bruins, formerly at the University of Essex; Henk Wilke and Elske Dronkert, Leiden University; and with Joel Brockner and Larry Heuer, Columbia University; Nace and Mary Magner, Western Kentucky University; Rob Folger and Elizabeth Umphress; Ri'l Vermunt, Leiden University; Phyllis Siegel, Rutgers University),

- cross-cultural research on fairness judgments (together with Ken Price and Thomas Hall, University of Texas at Arlington; James Hunton, University of South Florida; Steve Lovett, San Diego State University at Imperial Valley; Mark Tippett, University of Exeter; and with Ri'l Vermunt; Paul van Lange, Free University Amsterdam; Bram Buunk, Nico van Yperen, and Evert van de Vliert, University of Groningen; Gerold Mikula, University of Graz; B. Nilsson and Kjell K.Y. Tšrnblom, University of Skšvde; Leo Montada, University of Trier), and

- research on individual differences in reactions to fair and unfair events (with David de Cremer, Maastricht University).

Jan-Willem van Prooijen is studying group dynamic aspects of fairness judgments at the Free University Amsterdam. Together with Henk Wilke, we have developed a group dynamics focus model. Jan-Willem's model states, among other things, that group dynamic aspects, such as status, bias, and interdependence, have a crucial role in the psychology of social justice and that people focus on these aspects to form fairness judgments. Joost Miedema, at Leiden University, is working together with Ri'l Vermunt on cognitive aspects of social justice. His research interests the effects of ego threats on people's responses to fair and unfair events. Joost's findings show, among other things, that fairness may be more important when people's egos have been threatened and also that fairness may be less important under conditions of ego threats. His research delineates the conditions under which one of these two effects occurs.
 Renske Putman is working at the Free University Amsterdam, together with Bert Klandermans and Annemieke Winder, on a research project on the integration of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands and the role that perceived fairness by governmental institutions plays in this.

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New Books about and around Justice

Newly Published Books

Abrahams, F., & Stover, E. (2001). A Village Destroyed, May 14, 1999: War Crimes in Kosovo. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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