Chapter 6

The Experience of Injustice
TOWARD A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF ITS PHENOMENOLOGY

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"The more to a man's disadvantage the rule of distributive justice fails of realization, the more likely he is to display the emotional behavior we call anger" (Homans, 1961, p. 75). This proposition of Homans (1961), his related analyses, and Adams' (1965) seminal work on inequity were the main stimuli for the development of a new area of social psychological inquiry dealing with justice and injustice. Considerable progress has been made in this field, as documented in several recent books (e.g., Folger, 1984; Greenberg & Cohen, 1982; Lerner & Lerner, 1981; Mikula, 1980). However, as Deutsch (1983) has correctly pointed out recently, "there is practically no research relating to the phenomenology of injustice, to the actual experiences of people who inflict injustice or to those who suffer injustice" (p. 312). There is very little evidence on the quality of emotions that follow perception of an injustice (see Greenberg's 1984 review of what evidence there is); the same holds for the cognitive processes elicited by the perception of an injustice. Several authors (e.g., Cohen, 1982; Kayser & Schwinger, 1982; Mikula, 1984; Utne & Kidd, 1980) have suggested that attributional thoughts will be elicited and mediate the reactions to a perceived unjust event. Empirical data are lacking here too, however.
One major reason for our poor knowledge of what people think and feel when they confront an unjust event lies in methodological difficulties. To learn about these processes one must rely on subjects' self-reports, which are of questionable validity. However, if we really want to proceed in our understanding it is important to study what people think and feel when they confront an unjust event, and how these cognitions and feelings mediate their final reactions. The bias toward rigorous methodology should not prevent the relevant research from being conducted, even if the data collected are not as pure as one would like them to be.

The present chapter reports several studies that move in this direction. Two different methodologies have been used to collect empirical data on the nature of experiences of injustice and their consequences. The first consists of retrospective reports of unjust events people have actually confronted. The second methodology consists of a passive role-playing technique. Subjects are given descriptions of the unfair treatment of a person and are asked to place themselves either in the role of the unfairly treated person or in the role of an unaffected observer of the unfair event. Then they have to record their feelings and thoughts in the situation described. Because of space limitations and the preliminary nature of this research, it seems appropriate to focus the discussion on the methodologies used and on the main results obtained. The implications of the results for future research and a proper conceptualization of injustice experiences also will be suggested.

RETROSPECTIVE REPORTS ON EXPERIENCES OF INJUSTICE

The main reason for analyzing retrospective reports is to collect information on unjust events people actually confront in their daily lives. In typical social psychological studies of injustice, subjects are confronted with situations the experimenter believes to be unjust (e.g., inequitable payment). Even if subjects are later asked to rate the fairness or unfairness of the situation, very little is known about how relevant and common the situation is for the subjects. In contrast, the present approach provides information about actual, common, and relevant experiences of injustice. Furthermore, by using this approach, it should be possible to learn about the most typical social settings in which people feel unjustly treated. We also can learn about the events and treatments people especially feel to be unfair, and how they react to injustices in their daily lives. As such, this approach should yield richer information than usually collected in experimental settings.