Chapter 9

Social Context and Perceived Justice

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary research on fairness and justice has focused on the situational determinants of the relationship between performance and reward. Social psychologists have emphasized the influence of contributions of the group members on the reward distribution. In contrast to this major interest area in justice studies, the influence of the reward allocation on the inferred input level of the group members has received relatively little attention.

Allocation decisions may resemble the equity or proportionality principle (allocating according to equal outcome-input ratios among group members), the equality principle (allocating equally among group members), and the need principle (allocating according to individual needs). In addition, other distribution rules may be available (e.g., “take more/give less” and “take all”; Kayser & Schwinger, 1982: Lerner, 1981).

In the discussion that follows, two restrictions should be noted. First, only the allocation of material rewards will be considered. Second, only the equity principle and the equality principle will be discussed. In the present chapter we attempt to break new ground in justice research in two ways: first, by varying equity and equality independently (cf.
Brickman & Bryan, 1976) with regard to social context, and second, by focusing on backward inferences from rewards to contributions.

JUSTICE IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS: EQUITY OR EQUALITY

Two distribution rules are near universal: the equity rule and the equality rule. In fact, both rules are applied in similar social situations. Lerner (1981) distinguishes between acquisition processes (i.e., vicarious dependency, convergent goals, or divergent goals) and the perceived relation to others (i.e., identity, unit/similarity, or nonunit). Where there is the perception of similarity and convergent goal acquisition, either equity or equality is expected. Which of the two principles is more likely to be employed will depend on the focus of attention. When attention is focused on goals, cooperative relationships and the equity distribution rule should be the emergent activities. When the focus is the interpersonal relationship, a team relation as well as the equality rule should emerge.

In terms of theory, a competition between the equity and the equality principle can be expected in many areas. For example, what does it mean to establish equal opportunities for education? The equity principle favors the selection and promotion of the best students. On the other hand, the equality principle argues for the compensation of unequal sociocultural conditions and even reverse discrimination. The complex issues involved in this controversy are discussed more fully by Sampson (1981).

The equity principle appears to be one widely used script for the distribution of rewards. The principle states that members of a group should allocate rewards in proportion to the contribution of each person. Each person derives his or her satisfaction from the fact that group members receive shares proportional to their contributions.

The equality principle appears to be another widely used script for the distribution of rewards. This principle states that members of a group should allocate resources to self and others equally. Each person derives his or her satisfaction from the fact that each member of the group receives an equal share.

The equity rule requires prior knowledge of the contributions of the group members, whereas the use of the equality rule does not rest on such knowledge. In addition, the equity principle is more appropriate when differences among people are stressed, whereas the equality principle is more appropriate when the equality of, and similarity among, people is emphasized. These and other differences between the two