Is Outcome Fairness Used to Make Procedural Fairness Judgments When Procedural Information is Inaccessible?

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In a study of relocation decisions at seven different sites, procedural fairness was shown to be more sensitive to outcome fairness when respondents had less time to gather information about decision procedures. We interpret this finding to show that inaccessibility of information about decision procedures moderates the influence of outcome fairness judgments on procedural fairness judgments, such that outcome recipients rely more heavily on outcome fairness as a basis for forming procedural fairness judgments when information about decision procedures is not available. A second, laboratory study is reported that confirms the information inaccessibility explanation in the first study. When procedural information is available, procedural characteristics may be the primary bases for procedural fairness judgments, but when such information is unavailable, procedural fairness will likely be more sensitive to self-interest concerns. Future research should therefore take contextual factors such as accessibility to procedural information into account, given that there are likely to be differences on that dimension between organizational settings on the one hand and legal, political, and dispute resolution settings on the other. Information about decision procedures, generally accessible in legal, political, and dispute resolution settings, is often much less accessible in organizations.

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Research on “organizational justice” (Greenberg, 1987, 1990) focuses on people's judgments of the fairness of organizational decisions. Two types

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of fairness perceptions have received particular research attention: judgments of outcome fairness and procedural fairness. Outcome fairness (also known as distributive justice; Homans, 1961) judgments are evaluations of the results produced by an allocation decision; procedural fairness judgments (Thibaut and Walker, 1975) are evaluations of the process used to make the decision.

Thibaut and Walker (1975) advanced a model of procedural fairness which maintained that judgments of procedural fairness are based on outcome recipients' considerations of long-term self-interest. Lind and Tyler (1988) labeled that perspective on procedural fairness the "self-interest model." One of the model's predictions, according to Lind and Tyler, was that outcome fairness will influence procedural fairness judgments (p. 226). An example of the influence that outcome information can have on procedural fairness judgments can be seen in public opinion polls surrounding the O. J. Simpson trial and its attending outcome. In a CBS News poll taken before the verdict, only about 40% of African Americans indicated they believed the trial was fair while nearly 80% believed he received a fair trial when polled after the verdict of "not guilty" was known (Gottlieb, 1995).

Numerous early studies of legal and dispute resolution decisions (e.g., Latour, 1978; Lind et al., 1980; Walker et al., 1974) found that procedural fairness influences outcome fairness (i.e., outcomes are viewed as fairer when the procedures that generate them are considered fair). Lind and Tyler (1988) maintain that causality between the two variables is reciprocal and there is experimental evidence to show that outcomes (if not outcome fairness per se) can influence procedural fairness judgments (Conlon et al., 1989; Lind and Lissak, 1985). Additionally, outcome-based concerns have been shown to affect procedural fairness as well (Shapiro and Brett, 1993). There is some evidence to show that the influence of outcomes on procedural fairness judgments is enhanced by a number of moderator variables, specifically the degree of consideration apparently given to the decision by the decision maker (Conlon et al., 1989), the lack of recipient input into the decision (Paese, 1985), and the degree of impropriety apparent in the enactment of the procedure (Lind and Lissak, 1985).

Brockner and Wiesenfeld (1996) theorize that when people think about allocation decisions, they actively seek information about the decision in order to make sense of it. Furthermore, people more likely engage in sense-making activities when either the outcome is unfair or unfavorable, or the procedures appear unfair. Thus, for example, when outcomes are unfavorable, people look for information about the decision-making procedures, if they do not have such information already.