Equality and Differentiation: Effects of Group Structure on Allocations

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Two studies using vignettes explore some conditions under which equity, equality, and need as allocation rules are taken into account by an outside allocator. Independent variables include information about success or failure of a work group, level of morale of the group, relative contributions of work group members, responsibility for outcome, and influence of one individual on others. Results suggest that differentiation based on both equity and need results from a focus on individual deserving while equality among status equals results from focus on group level factors. An interaction between outcome and contribution appears when group level factors are included; these effects also appear when there are two rather than only one target person differing from the rest of a group; an overreward effect depends on attributions of responsibility for outcome; and an influential member is seen as deserving even if a low contributor. No gender differences were found.

KEY WORDS: allocation; distributive justice; equality; equity.

INTRODUCTION

Our interest is in the processes that affect how persons in groups and organizations decide what allocation is fair when scarce rewards must be divided up among several individuals. Such processes include both the formation and implementation of social norms (e.g., Berger et al., 1972; 1985; Meeker, 1971; Stolte, 1987) and cognitive processes (e.g., Anderson, 1976; Harris, 1983; Markovsky, 1988; Jasso, 1980) (General reviews of research

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on justice, equity, fairness, and allocation may be found in Deutsch, 1985; Greenberg and Cohen, 1982; Cook and Hegtvedt, 1983; Sell and Griffith, in press; Tornblom, 1988; Hegtvedt and Markovsky, 1994). It is common to frame questions about allocation as a competition between the principles of equity (which means that individuals' rewards should be proportional to their inputs) and equality (which means all members of a group should be rewarded equally). However, this confounds several underlying processes. For example, an allocator may decide to reward individuals differently but in response to factors other than input. Likewise, although an observed equal allocation may reflect the operation of a norm of equality, it might on the other hand reflect the operation of a norm of equity in which it has been judged that everyone had equal inputs, or an attempt to implement a norm of equity in which information about relative inputs is conflicting. Also, since the work of Deutsch (1975) it has been recognized that other criteria such as need may cause allocators to treat recipients unequally. It has become clear that a complex variety of social comparisons and evaluations underlies allocation behavior. In this paper, we explore some of the attributes of groups as well as of individuals that may affect the judgments of an allocator who is trying to make a fair allocation among members of a group.

THE RESEARCH PARADIGM

The research reported here follows Elliott and Meeker (1984; 1986) and Meeker and Elliott (1987). As did the earlier Elliott and Meeker studies, our present study uses vignettes to explore the allocations made by a subject told to place himself or herself in the role of supervisor of a hypothetical work group (i.e., the subject does not personally share in the allocation). The subject is asked to imagine him/herself the supervisor of a group of student research assistants whose task is to conduct telephone interviews for a survey research organization. The questionnaire then goes on to describe a property of the group, namely, that the project either was a failure (all the interviews were not completed) or was a success (all the interviews were completed) or that the group had high or low morale. Then the subject is told it is up to “you, as the project supervisor” to divide up $1000 among the five research assistants “according to whatever distribution seems to be most fitting.” The number of telephone calls completed by each assistant, A, B, C, D, and E is listed. Person B's number of phone calls is either much higher or much lower than the others. Where need is varied, information is provided about the assistants' level of need for the money the job pays. Then the subject is asked to write in a dollar amount