with other people to articulate goals, create plans, and implement strategies. Leaders thus have to create a positive work environment for others who occupy subordinate positions. To create that work environment, leaders have to ensure that all people involved are satisfied with their work environment, including the decisions made and actions taken by the leaders.

Evaluations of fairness play an important role in people’s satisfaction with their circumstances. People’s judgments of justice also have important implications for how they respond to situations and interactions. In order for leaders to achieve their goals, they must understand the impact of justice concerns on people’s reactions to their circumstances.

BEHAVIOR IN A JUST WORLD

People almost always work with assumptions of justice, even when they do not explicitly articulate justice principles in a particular context. The social psychologist Melvin Lerner (1980) proposes that people experience a “justice motive,” which he describes as a need or desire for justice, the concern with “deserving” and justice, and the distress associated with inequity or injustice.

Lerner argues that people believe that the world is fair or just and apply this belief to their perceptions of interactions and situations. People have this “belief in a just world” (BJW) in order to satisfy their need for orderliness and controllability.

Perceiving acts of injustice or victims of injustice violates people’s sense that the world is a fair place. People will condemn victims as a defensive maneuver to protect their belief in justice. Victims are perceived as being unattractive, deserving of suffering, conforming to authority, and controlling the situation. Lerner’s research has shown that even martyrs, typically held in high esteem by society, are derogated. Presumably this derogation occurs because the suffering of an innocent or nobly motivated victim would threaten one’s belief in a just world.

How do people know that the derogation of victims is an indication of a need to preserve the illusion of justice and not just an indication of general misanthropy? The answer is that derogation has been
observed in research studies only when participants have no way to compensate an innocent victim. If participants are given an opportunity to help compensate a victim, they generally take the opportunity and do not derogate the victim.

Further evidence supporting Lerner’s assertion that people have a need to believe in a just world has recently been produced by Canadian researcher, Carolyn Hafer. Hafer has demonstrated that participants who hear a news story about an unpunished crime are more emotionally upset than participants who hear a news story about a crime situation in which the criminal is caught and punished. Unpunished crimes violate people’s sense of justice, and when people’s sense of justice is violated, they experience distress.

Whereas social psychologists such as Lerner have examined the justice motive, others have considered how people arrive at judgments of justice or injustice. On what basis do people perceive injustice? Social psychologists have considered three types of principles that may be used to make judgments of fairness. These principles are distributive justice (which addresses outcomes), procedural justice (which addresses process or procedure), and retributive justice (which addresses punishing perpetrators for their wrongdoing).

DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

When people use distributive justice norms, they interpret fairness in terms of distributions or outcomes. The most influential theory of distributive justice is equity theory. Originally proposed by J. Stacey Adams, equity theory was further developed by Elaine (Hatfield) Walster, Ellen Berscheid, and G. William Walster. Equity theory posits that people feel most comfortable in equitable or fair situations or interactions. Generally, a situation is considered equitable when people receive rewards or goods in proportion to the level of their contribution. In an equitable exchange or interaction, one person’s outcomes to relative inputs are equal to the other person’s outcomes to relative inputs. A person’s inputs are his or her contributions to the exchange, and a person’s outputs are his or her “receipts” from the exchange. An equitable relationship is one in which profits are proportionate to inputs.

Expressed as an algebraic formula, the central proposition of equity theory is that justice is obtained when:

\[
\text{Outcomes of person A} = \frac{\text{Inputs of person A}}{\text{Inputs of person B}} = \frac{\text{Outputs of person B}}{\text{Outputs of person A}}
\]

When the proportions are not equal, inequity occurs. If, for example, the ratio of outcomes to inputs is greater for A than for B, A is overbenefited, and B is underbenefited.

Equity theory proposes that inequitable relationships arouse tension or distress, which in turn produce emotional responses, both in those who overbenefit (exploiters) and those who underbenefit (the exploited). Emotional responses such as guilt, shame, and fear are felt by the overbenefited. The underbenefited experience emotional responses such as anger, frustration, and dissatisfaction. According to Walster, Berscheid, and Walster, emotional reactions to inequity are more likely to occur among underbenefited people than among overbenefited people. Of course, different people may have different assessments of who is overbenefited or underbenefited depending on what they count as legitimate inputs and valued outcomes.

To reduce their distress over an inequitable situation, people are motivated to eliminate the inequity, either in actuality or in their perceptions. Inequity may be reduced in a number of ways. First, people can increase or decrease their own inputs or outcomes. For example, the worker who feels that he is working harder than the woman next to him may slow down the pace of his work in order to restore equity. Second, people can attempt to increase or decrease the other person’s inputs or outcomes. The dissatisfied worker might steal money from the woman whom he sees as too highly compensated, or he may throw obstacles in her way as she goes about her job. Third, people can cognitively distort their inputs and outcomes. The worker might convince himself that he is not working very hard or is not very talented, or he might convince himself that he is gaining a lot of nonmaterial benefits (e.g., great experience). Fourth,
people can cognitively distort the inputs or outputs of the comparison person. Finally, people can “leave the field.” The worker who feels inequitably treated might quit his or her job.

Although equity theory has been extremely influential in social psychology, it has not escaped criticism. One serious problem, according to Morton Deutsch, is the implication that all interactions among people are exchanges characterized in terms of inputs and outcomes. Deutsch points out that equity applies mostly to business or impersonal relationships. Other norms of distributive justice, such as equality or need, seem to be used in relationships outside the contexts of business. Some evidence from surveys and experiments indicates that equity may not be the central consideration when people make justice judgments about close interpersonal relationships.

PROCEDURAL JUSTICE

Starting with the 1975 publication of John Thibaut and Laurens Walker’s landmark book *Procedural Justice: A Psychological Analysis*, social psychologists have recognized that individuals care not only about distribution or outcomes, but also about the procedures by which outcomes are derived. Procedural justice theories hypothesize that people will find a negative or undesirable outcome acceptable if it is achieved through fair procedures and that people will find an objectively positive outcome unacceptable if it is achieved through unfair procedures. One aspect of what constitutes fair procedures is the opportunity to express one’s point of view.

Initial research on procedural justice developed out of Thibaut and Walker’s (1975) examination of third-party decisions in conflict situations. Subsequent work has found judgments of procedural fairness to be important in a variety of contexts, such as the law, politics, education, and business. Judgments of procedural justice have important implications for people’s reactions to situations or interactions. For example, people’s judgments of procedural fairness in legal procedures affect their willingness to accept decisions more than does the actual outcome of the legal procedures. Research reveals that people’s perceptions of group authorities, institutions, and rules are influenced by procedural justice judgments. Judgments of procedural justice have also been found to (1) enhance feelings of loyalty to organizations, (2) enhance willingness to help organizations, (3) enhance one’s commitment to one’s organization, and (4) affect reactions to overall organizational rules. In business contexts people adhere to agreements over time if they feel that the initial decision is procedurally fair.

One important question to be addressed is why people care about procedures. Thibaut and Walker argue that procedures matter because they permit people to feel that they can help mold outcomes. In this view people care about procedures because, in the long run, procedures affect outcomes.

Another possibility is that people care about procedures for expressive or noninstrumental reasons. Working in concert with a number of other collaborators, Tom Tyler has developed a relational model of procedural justice. Tyler’s relational model posits that people want to feel that they are valued members of respected groups. Being well treated by authorities communicates respect.

Consistent with the relational model of procedural justice is the finding that the opportunity to express one’s opinion makes people feel that procedures are fair even when the opportunity for expression comes after a decision has been made. If procedural fairness mattered only for instrumental reasons, such a finding would not have been obtained. More support for the group value model of procedural justice comes from the finding that explanations help people cope with disappointing events. In one study Jerald Greenberg recorded the amount of sabotage and resignations that occurred in industrial plants that faced pay decreases. In the plant where management respectfully explained the reasons for the decreases and apologized for them, sabotage and resignations were much less pronounced than in the plant where management gave a curt announcement.

Although procedural justice concerns matter in many situations, in some situations people’s justice judgments do not depend on whether or not they assess procedures as being fair. For some issues, some people have what Linda Skitka calls “moral
mandates” by which they feel strongly about the issues regardless of the situation. Consider a person who has a moral mandate stating that abortion is wrong. For such a person, learning that the Supreme Court had followed all the proper procedures in determining that abortion is a woman’s right does nothing to change the person’s condemnation of the court’s decision.

**RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE**

Although retribution, revenge, and compensation are basic and pervasive justice reactions evident in even the most ancient civilizations, until recently social scientists have paid less attention to the dynamics of corrective justice than to distributive or procedural justice. Much of the research in the area of social justice borrows from the civil and criminal justice literature in the United States. Although justice researchers recognize that jurisprudence is culturally determined, they also assume the existence of some general moral imperatives.

When a wrong occurs, society sometimes reacts by focusing on the victim and sometimes reacts by focusing on the perpetrator. In the former situation the overarching concern is to make the victim whole in the sense of restoring or compensating for what has been lost. Based on the extent of “damages” suffered and “pain and suffering,” the compensation due to the victim varies. New legal conventions, such as the “victim impact statement,” aim to restore dignity and value to the victim by giving the victim voice, an important element of procedural justice.

Sometimes the overarching concern after a wrong is to punish the perpetrator. The impulse to punish is a manifestation of moral condemnation. When one does not adhere to societal rules, others feel contempt, disgust, and (most commonly) anger—which lead to moral outrage and a concern for retribution. Retribution is a “passionate reaction” to the violation of a societal rules, norms, or laws.

Punishment of the rule violator serves several purposes. Some punishment is aimed at incapacitating the perpetrator so that he or she cannot commit future harmful acts. In most cases punishment also serves to vindicate societal rules, to legitimate group norms, and to restore homeostasis (reducing negative emotion and cognitions). Oftentimes perpetrators are demonized. Such demonization helps members of society convince themselves that the perpetrators lie outside the scope of their own moral community and thereby bolsters any threatened beliefs in the just world.

Many factors affect the extent to which perpetrators are punished for violating societal rules. The seriousness of the crime (i.e., nature of the offense) is associated with applicable punishment. The state of mind of the perpetrator and mitigating circumstances also affect the extent to which punishment is prescribed. Perpetrators tend to be punished more if the act was seen as reckless rather than negligent, if the act was seen as foreseeable and intentional rather than unforeseeable, and if there was evidence of a desired outcome and knowledge that the outcome was morally wrong. Perpetrators are punished less if they express remorse and offer confessions and apologies for their actions.

**CONCLUSIONS FROM JUSTICE RESEARCH**

Social psychological research has demonstrated that people care about justice and wish to believe that the world is a just or fair place. People can use three types of principles—distributive, procedural, and retributive—to determine whether a situation or interaction is just. Ample support exists for each of these principles to be used in judgments of justice, and the particular context may determine which principle(s) people use. For instance, when people wish to gain a certain outcome, they are likely to use the principle of distributive justice to evaluate the situation or interaction. If people’s relationship to a decision maker is most salient, however, they will probably use the principle of procedural justice to determine whether the situation is fair. Finally, if the context includes the perpetrator of an illegitimate harm, people will probably use the principle of retributive justice to evaluate the interaction.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS**

The social psychological literature on social justice has at least two significant implications for leaders.
First, leaders must recognize that justice is an important concept in people’s everyday lives. The fact that people would like to view the world as a just place suggests that leaders must ensure that the environments they set up for others should be (perceived as) fair. For instance, the policies and practices that govern the particular organization or workplace should be seen as legitimate, and the leader’s actions and decisions should also be viewed as fair.

Second, leaders must be aware that different principles may be used to determine whether a situation or interaction is fair. They need to use the principles of distributive and procedural justice in making a situation or decision fair. Leaders should not only ensure that they apply the rules of equity in determining rewards and punishments, but also establish good relationships with everyone they work with. Only when their interactions are characterized by trust, respect, and neutrality will others perceive the leaders’ decisions and actions as procedurally just.

—Aarti Iyer, Jamie L. Franco, and Faye J. Crosby

Further Reading


