

# On the psychology of justice as a social regulation tool

David De Cremer\* and Marius van Dijke\*\*

This paper introduces the idea of justice as a social regulation tool to explain why justice information has such a significant impact in our social lives. Our approach holds that justice shapes people's social self, motivations and behaviour and therefore has to be considered fundamentally social in nature. Given our unique position as social animals, it is concluded that justice as an important social concern classifies as an important regulation tool in our social lives. (*Netherlands Journal of Psychology*, 65, 114-117).

Keywords: justice; fairness; identity; self; self-regulation

The issue of social justice is a dominating theme in our daily lives as it reflects a fundamental concern in most of our interactions with others. Concerns about the value of justice in our social lives go back to ancient moral philosophers such as Plato and Socrates (Rawls, 1971). Moreover, the concept of justice is related to humanitarian and ethical standards that describe how we should act and treat others (e.g., Miller, 2001), as such emphasising its social nature. To study this important social aspect of our interactions with others, the psychological literature has distinguished between different types of justice. Specifically, contemporary justice research distin-

guishes between distributive (i.e. the fairness of the outcome received), procedural (i.e. the fairness of the decision-making procedure) and interactional (the respect and dignity one receives during the treatment) justice (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005).

The importance assigned to these different types of justice emphasises clearly that information about justice has social consequences. For example, receiving fair or unfair outcomes signals our (economic) position towards others and the employment of fair procedures signals that we are valued by the decision-maker. As a result, it follows that justice is an important social regulation tool because it helps shaping (a) how our interactions with others evolve and are coordinated, (b) how we can evaluate ourselves in the social world in a meaningful way (i.e. self-esteem), and (c) how our motives and identity are regulated.

In fact, in the present special issue we would like to zoom in on the social implications that justice reveals. Recent research on procedural justice has revealed many insights regarding what we like to call 'the social regulation potential of

\* Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University and Ghent University

\*\* Open University of the Netherlands

Correspondence: David De Cremer, Rotterdam School of Management, Centre of Behavioral Ethics, Department Business-Society Management, Erasmus University, Burgemeester Oudlaan 50, 3062 PA Rotterdam, the Netherlands. E-mail: [ddecremer@rsm.nl](mailto:ddecremer@rsm.nl)

Received 11 August 2009; revision accepted 16 September 2009.

*justice*. For example, receiving outcomes by means of fair procedures and respectful treatment does not only lead to fair or even favourable outcomes (Shapiro & Brett, 2005; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), but also has consequences that directly implicate one's self-definition and social behaviour. As social interactions are the medium through which important others shape the opinion persons have of themselves (Hoelter, 1984) and the way persons evaluate or feel about themselves (Leary, 2006), justice (as a social regulation tool) thus clearly shapes people's identity, motivation and behaviour. Below, we briefly discuss some examples (and limitations) of this approach in the justice literature.

A first illustration is the idea that justice has clear implications for people's identity and self (De Cremer & Tyler, 2005; Tyler, Boeckmann, & Huo, 1997). This may not come as a surprise as the nature of people's self is fundamentally relational (see also Anderson, Chen, & Miranda, 2001; Leary, 2001; Tyler & Lind, 1992; Tyler & Smith, 1999). Indeed, as Sedikides and Gregg (2003, p. 110) note 'the self operates predominantly within the social world.' Furthermore, it is well accepted that people's social self is developed and constructed by information that one receives through social interactions with others (De Cremer, 2003; Leary, 2001; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). In turn, this relational information defines one's level of identity and goals, and ultimately regulates one's social actions (Carver & Scheier, 1998). From this perspective it is clear that justice reflects important social feedback that people attune to and that consequently shapes their identity and motivations.

This idea is nicely demonstrated in relational procedural fairness models such as the group-value model (Lind & Tyler, 1988), the relational model of authority (Tyler & Lind, 1992), and the group-based model of cooperation (De Cremer & Tyler, 2005). It is nowadays accepted that the self-concept can be seen as consisting of three levels of self-definition on which employees rely in seeking or achieving identity: collective, relational, and individual (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). The collective self is characterised by a reliance on collective goals, internalised group norms, and inter-group comparisons; the relational self implies a reliance on relational goals, role expectations, and dyadic connections; finally the individual self entails personal goals, self-enhancement, and intra-group comparisons. An important issue to note here is that justice can impact on the self and identity at each of these different levels. In other words, justice information can shape the individual, the relational and collective self, depending on the specific context justice information is communicated as well as on the type of justice information (e.g., Johnson, Selenta, & Lord, 2006).

This assumption is important to note as researchers have recently attempted to refer to many relational justice models as social identity theory models, thereby implying that justice is in fact a social identity issue. We argue that this is not the case. First of all, these relational models all make the assumption that the enactment of procedures influences people's social self (see De Cremer & Tyler, 2005). The social self in these models is seen as relational in nature because procedures are considered an interpersonal phenomenon and thus impact the recipient of the procedure (i.e., often the subordinate) in the relationship (Sedikides, Hart & De Cremer, 2008). Interestingly, depending on which level the individual interacts, different levels of identity will be influenced by procedural fairness: personal identity (i.e., relationships with an objective instance of the authority such as committees or governments), relational identity (i.e., dyadic relationships or within-group relationships) and collective identity (i.e., intergroup relationships). Thus, social identity as a reflection of a collective identity (as it is derived from intergroup interactions) represents just one aspect (albeit an important one) of people's social self that is impacted upon by the use of fair procedures.

A second illustration is that justice affects and activates particular goals, beliefs and values (cf. Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999). By activating goals the motives of people will energise and consequently direct behaviour (Carver, 2001; Pervin, 1982). In other words, justice has the potential to influence people's actions and thus guide the process of self-regulation (cf. Kunda, 1999), implying that justice has a strong motivational component. Acknowledging the idea of Carver (2001, p. 307) that, 'social behaviour is built ... on motivational processes', it is therefore no surprise that justice considerably impacts on people's behavioural responses (both negative and positive actions; see Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Yee, 2001, for meta analyses). This assumption is important to note because behavioural reactions are usually not considered to be part of the justice construct. For this reason, it is essential that a psychology of justice includes a motivational component to account for the effect of justice on behaviour.

To achieve this purpose, we advocate that looking at justice as a social regulation tool will help us (at a theoretical and applied level) to understand in greater detail why and how justice information shapes people's self and identity, behaviour, and motives in social settings. That is, we argue that justice information is considered one of the most important human concerns because it helps to shape our self and identity in the social world (e.g., our reputation and social self) and, consequently, our behavioural displays. In the present special issue we present five

papers addressing this social regulation potential of justice.

The first paper by Langendijk, van Dijke, and De Cremer (2009) sets out to show why fairly enacted procedures enhance followers' self-esteem by addressing the role of authority power in this process. They show that particularly high power authorities are effective in enhancing follower self-esteem, presumably because high power makes the authority more effective in influencing follower status (e.g., by promoting or, conversely, excluding the employee from the organisation). Furthermore, this effect is mediated by trust in the authority, as an indicator of a valued relationship with an authority who will protect followers' identity.

The second paper by Oreg and van Dam (2009) presents an overview of research addressing the role of justice in the context of organisational change. The role of justice in organisational change is an important topic to study for researchers because membership of work organisation forms an important part of many people's self-definition. In situations of change, justice should be of particular importance to organisation members. This is expected because justice forms a means to cope with uncertainty about tangible as well as intangible outcomes (e.g., uncertainty about belongingness to important groups; uncertainty about future outcomes; De Cremer, Brebels, & Sedikides, 2008; Shapiro & Brett, 2005; see van den Bos & Lind, 2002, for an overview).

The third paper by Verboon and Goslinga (2009) studies the relationship between justice considerations and attitudes and intentions towards compliance with tax authorities. Their research shows that personal norms as well as justice concerns are related to tax compliance attitudes. Moreover, distributive justice positively affects both tax compliance attitudes and intentions to comply, particularly among citizens with relatively low personal norms. This study thus forms another example of the relevance of the social context in which justice operates, this time by focusing on the role of inter-

nalised norms as a boundary to the effectiveness of procedural justice in shaping relationships with authorities.

The fourth paper by Rankin and Tyler (2009) expands upon findings (including the Verboon & Goslinga, 2009 paper) that justice plays an important role in shaping cooperation with social collectives and authorities representing these collectives. The authors show that specific aspects of justice differentially relate to norm-following compliance behaviours and voluntary helping behaviours. Specifically, when employees perceive their supervisors as procedurally fair in their decision-making, they show increased compliance with norms and expectations. When employees perceive their supervisors treating them respectfully, they increase voluntary efforts to help the organisation.

The fifth and final paper by van Dijk, Leliveld, and van Beest (2009) addresses the important question to what extent interaction partners show fair behaviour out of a motive to be fair, or out of strategic motivations to influence the interaction partner. They review research on ultimatum bargaining. Based on this review, they argue that it is indeed relevant to distinguish between instrumental fairness and true fairness. They also identify personal (i.e., the social value orientation of bargainers) and situational moderators (the valence of the bargaining outcomes; the initial distribution of property) that affect the use of both types of fairness.

In conclusion, we think that these five papers nicely illustrate that justice has a pervasive impact in our social lives. Because of this pervasive influence, justice seems to have the potential to shape and regulate all aspects (i.e. social self and behaviour) that make us so unique as human beings (see also Krebs, 1998; van den Bos, Ham, Lind, Sinionis, van Essen, & Rijpkema, 2008, for evolutionary approaches to the study of justice). It is our hope that future justice researchers will address the social regulation characteristics of justice in greater detail and help in developing a social-dynamic perspective on the pivotal role of justice in people's lives.

## References

- Andersen, S. M., Chen, S., & Miranda, R. (2002). Significant others and the self. *Self and Identity*, 1, 159-168.
- Brewer, M. B., & Gardner, W. (1996). Who is this 'we'? Levels of collective identity and self representations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71, 83-93.
- Carver, C. S. (2001). Affect and the functional bases of behavior: On the dimensional structure of affective experience. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5, 345-356.
- Carver, C. S., & Scheier, M. F. (1998). *On the self-regulation of behavior*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen-Charash, Y., & Spector, P. E. (2001). The role of justice in organizations: A meta-analysis. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 86, 278-321.
- Colquitt, J. A., Conlon, D. E., Wesson, M. J., Porter, C. O. L. H., & Yee, K. (2001). Justice at the millennium. A meta-analytic review of 25 years of orga-

- nizational justice research. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86, 425-445.
- De Cremer, D. (2003). Why inconsistent leadership is regarded as procedurally unfair: The importance of social self-esteem concerns. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 33, 535-550.
- De Cremer, D., Brebels, L., & Sedikides, C. (2008). Being uncertain about what? Procedural fairness effects as a function of general uncertainty and belongingness uncertainty. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44, 1520-1525.
- De Cremer, D., & Tyler, T. R. (2005). Managing group behavior: The interplay between procedural justice, sense of self, and cooperation. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 37, pp. 151-218). San Diego, CA: Elsevier Academic Press.
- Greenberg, J., & Colquitt, J. A. (2005). *Handbook of organizational justice*. New York / London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hoelter, J. W. (1984). Relative effects of significant others on self-evaluation. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 47, 255-262.
- Johnson, R. E., Selenta, C. & Lord, G. (2006). When Organizational Justice and the Self-concept meet: Consequences for the organization and its members. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 199, 175-201.
- Krebs, D. (1998). The evolution of moral behaviors. In C. Crawford & D. L. Krebs (Eds.), *Handbook of evolutionary psychology: Ideas, issues, and applications* (pp. 337-368). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Kunda, Z. (1999). *Social cognition: Making sense of people*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Langendijk, G., van Dijke, M. H., & De Cremer, D. (2009). How power and trust explain procedural fairness effects on self-esteem. *Netherlands Journal of Psychology*, 65, 118-126.
- Leary, M. (2001). The self as a source of relational difficulties. *Self and Identity*, 1, 137-142.
- Leary, M. R. (2006). To what extent is self-esteem influenced by interpersonal as compared with intrapersonal processes? What are these processes? In: M. H. Kernis (Ed.), *Self-esteem issues and answers: A sourcebook of current perspectives*. (pp. 195-200). New York: Psychology Press.
- Leary, M. R., & Baumeister, R. F. (2000). The nature and function of self-esteem: Sociometer theory. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 32, pp.1-62). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Lind, E. A., & Tyler, T. R. (1988). *The social psychology of procedural justice*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Lord, R. G., Brown, D. J., & Freiberg, S. J. (1999). Understanding the dynamics of leadership: The role of follower self-concepts in the leader/follower relationship. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 78, 167-203.
- Miller, D. T. (2001). Disrespect and the experience of injustice. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 527-553.
- Oreg, S., & van Dam, K. (2009). Organizational justice in the context of organizational change. *Netherlands Journal of Psychology*, 65, 127-135.
- Pervin, L. A. (1982). The stasis and flow of behavior: Toward a theory of goals. *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*, 1-53.
- Rankin, R. E., & Tyler, T. R. (2009). Justice and cooperation. *Netherlands Journal of Psychology*, 65, 146-154.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sedikides, C., & Brewer, M. B. (2001). *Individual self, relational self, collective self*. Philadelphia: Psychology Press.
- Sedikides, C., & Gregg, A. (2003). Portraits of the self. In M. A. Hogg & J. Cooper (Eds.), *Sage handbook of social psychology*. London: Sage Publications.
- Sedikides, C., Hart, C. M., & De Cremer, D. (2008). The self in procedural fairness. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2, 2107-2124.
- Shapiro, D. L., & Brett, J. M. (2005). What is the role of control in organizational justice? In: J. Greenberg & J. A. Colquitt (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational justice* (pp. 155-178). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Thibaut, J., & Walker, L. (1975). *Procedural justice: A psychological analysis*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Tyler, T. R., Boeckmann, R. J., Smith, H. J., & Huo, Y. J. (1997). *Social justice in a diverse society*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Tyler, T. R., & Lind, E. A. (1992). A relational model of authority in groups. In M. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 25, pp. 115-191). New York: Academic Press.
- van den Bos, K., Ham, J., Lind, E. A., Sinionis, M., van Essen, W. J., Rijkema, M. (2008). Justice and the human alarm system: The impact of exclamation points and flashing lights on the justice judgment process. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44, 201-219.
- van den Bos, K., & Lind, E. A. (2002). Uncertainty management by means of fairness judgments. In M. P. Zanna. (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 34, pp. 1-60). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- van Dijk, E., Leliveld, M. C., & van Beest, I. (2009). If it walks like fairness, and quacks like fairness, it sometimes is fairness: Instrumental and true fairness in bargaining. *Netherlands Journal of Psychology*, 65, 155-162.
- Verboon, P., & Goslinga, S. (2009). The role of fairness in tax compliance. *Netherlands Journal of Psychology*, 65, 136-145.