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How Self-Relevant is Fair Treatment? Social Self-Esteem Moderates Interactional Justice Effects

David De Cremer,^{1,4} Daan van Knippenberg,²
Marius van Dijke,³ and Arjan E. R. Bos³

An organizational field study examined the extent to which fair treatment influences organizational commitment as a function of employees' levels of social self-esteem. Following recent research indicating that self-esteem acts as a moderator of procedural fairness effects, we suggested that to examine the relational assumption that self and procedures are related, one should assess the social dimension of self-esteem. In line with predictions, the results indeed showed that fair treatment (assessed by an interactional justice scale) positively influences affective commitment, but only when employees have low social self-esteem. These findings are discussed in light of research on relational models of justice and sociometer theory.

KEY WORDS: interactional justice; social self-esteem; affective commitment.

The issue of justice is a dominating theme in our daily lives and concerns about it go back to the ancient moral philosophers like Plato and Socrates (Rawls, 1971). The concept of justice is related to people's expectations about the outcomes they should receive, but also to humanitarian standards that describe how we think that we should act and be treated (e.g., Folger and Cropanzano, 1998; Miller, 2001). This line of thinking about justice is, for example, reflected in many discussions within groups and organizations in which people often talk and negotiate about whether they received the appropriate outcomes (i.e., *distributive justice*, Deutsch, 1985) and whether correct and fair procedures have been used in arriving at those

¹Department of Economic and Social Psychology, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands.

²Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

³Open University, Heerlen, The Netherlands.

⁴Correspondence should be addressed to David De Cremer, Department of Economic and Social Psychology, P.O. Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands; e-mail: d.decremer@uvt.nl.

outcomes (i.e., *procedural justice*). In the present paper, we focus on the latter instantiation of the social justice concept. This focus emerges from recent research that has paid considerable interest to determining the extent to which people evaluate the fairness of procedures (Tyler *et al.*, 1997). This line of research was motivated largely by Lind and Tyler's (1988) argument that fairness judgments and other types of reactions are influenced more strongly by procedures than by outcomes.

Why is the fairness of treatment—by means of fair procedures—so important to people? Early theories explained people's desire for fair procedures from an instrumental perspective (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut and Walker, 1975). That is, having, for example, the opportunity to voice one's opinion can reveal control over one's own outcomes, suggesting that procedures are important for *instrumental* reasons. However, relative to this instrumental viewpoint, recent theories such as the group-value model (Lind and Tyler, 1988) and the relational model of authority (Tyler and Lind, 1992) assume that people also consider *self-relevant* implications of the procedures enacted by the authority. More specifically, these models suggest that if leaders use fair procedures, those procedures also convey a symbolic message that one is respected and valued by those leaders. Indeed, Lind and Tyler (1988) proposed that people involved in interpersonal relationships with an authority use procedures to obtain information about their own self and identity, and, in addition, previous research has demonstrated that the use of fair procedures positively influences one's self-esteem (Koper *et al.*, 1993; Shroth and Shah, 2000). Thus, procedures involve, at least partly, an element of how fairly one feels *treated* during the interaction that one has with the representative group authority. This interactional element of procedures—in turn—is believed to influence the self-worth of the individual group member. Indeed, recently, Tyler (2001) explicitly noted that the type of relational information that procedures communicate is focused “on the individual,” and the extent to which one has a positive standing in the interpersonal relationship with the relevant authority. As such, the interactional element of fair procedures influences individuals' self-evaluations and feelings of social acceptance (Tyler and Smith, 1999).

This pivotal role of the interactional element of procedural fairness in affecting people's self-worth and evaluation has been demonstrated by a vast amount of studies showing positive relationships between procedures and reported self-esteem (e.g., Koper *et al.*, 1993; Tyler, 1999; Tyler *et al.*, 1996). However, Brockner *et al.* (1998) also noted that in our quest for determining the self-relevant implications of procedural fairness, we should not only use self-evaluations as a dependent variable but also as a moderator variable. Indeed, Brockner *et al.* argue that when it comes to procedural fairness effects “relatively few studies have investigated the moderating role of theoretically derived, individual-difference variables.” (pp. 395) In this respect, they concluded that one type of individual difference that should matter particularly to procedural fairness is trait self-esteem. Thus, these

authors advocated a person-situation approach (e.g., De Cremer, 2002; Mischel, 1973), suggesting that the psychological effect of fair treatment should depend on the moderating effect of level of people's trait self-esteem. As expected, in a first empirical attempt to examine this moderating effect on fair treatment Brockner *et al.* (1998) indeed showed that the procedure of voice had different effects on people of varying levels of general self-esteem (e.g., items from the Rosenberg, 1979 self-esteem scale and the organization-based self-esteem scale; Pierce *et al.*, 1989). The pattern of the interaction showed that voice influenced a variety of dependent variables more among those high in self-esteem than among those low in self-esteem, supporting the assertion that self-esteem acts as a moderator of fair treatment effects.

However, although the interaction clearly indicated that procedural fairness has self-esteem relevant implications, the pattern of the data can be seen as somewhat unexpected when interpreted in the light of relational models of justice. Indeed, these models claim that fair treatment indicates one's acceptance and value within the group (e.g., Tyler and Lind, 1992). In addition, according to sociometer theory (Leary and Baumeister, 2000), the function of self-esteem is to monitor the degree to which one feels included by others, that is, the quality of one's interpersonal interactions with others. This implies that self-esteem has a communicative function signaling whether one is socially accepted by others or not (Leary *et al.*, 1995). Therefore, delineating both relational models of justice and sociometer theory we argue that self-esteem is to a large extent socially constructed and as a consequence should be influenced by the fairness of treatment.⁵ Applying such a perspective one should then expect that people low in self-esteem should be most sensitive to relational information like procedures and treatment—something that was not found by Brockner *et al.*

Therefore, we argue that to examine whether fair treatment has implications for the socially constructed self (as argued by both sociometer theory and relational models of justice) by means of a person \times situation approach, the *social dimension* of people's self-esteem needs to be addressed (and not the general level of self-esteem as Brockner *et al.* did). One scale very relevant to this purpose is the social self-esteem subscale of Heatherton and Polivy's State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES; Heatherton and Polivy, 1991). This subscale measures the extent to which one feels socially accepted and attractive in interpersonal relationships. Providing further support for the use of a social SE-scale, Heatherton and Polivy (1991, p. 907) also note that "the differential sensitivity of the component factors suggests

⁵This common focus on the relationship between self-esteem and feelings of acceptance/relational value within the group by both procedural fairness models (e.g., the group-value model) and sociometer theory is nicely articulated in Leary and Baumeister (2000, p. 20) argument that "being accepted as a member of an organization affects state self-esteem not only because it involves current acceptance, but also because it implies that one is regarded as a prized group member with high relational value."

that researchers may examine the specific subscales of the SSES to gauge the effectiveness of experimental treatments.” Moreover, the social factor of the SSES correlates highly with public self-consciousness; a process that is closely related to people’s concerns about their relationship with the authority (i.e., reputational social self; De Cremer and Tyler, in press; Tyler, 2001; Tyler and Smith, 1999).

Recently, two studies (De Cremer, 2003; Vermunt *et al.*, 2001) followed a similar line of thinking by arguing that Brockner *et al.* (1998) measured only feelings of general self-esteem and as such could not provide support for the claims of relational models that procedures communicate important social and relational information relevant to one’s self-esteem. In fact, these authors noted that Brockner *et al.*’s results rather demonstrated that perceptions of control and self-efficacy might have explained the voice-effects, as those participants high in self-esteem reacted most strongly to variations in voice. This was particularly clear in the experimental study, conducted by Brockner and colleagues, in which self-esteem was manipulated in a way that related strongly to self-efficacy. Therefore, to test the relational implications of procedures more accurately, Vermunt *et al.* (2001) measured participants’ state social self-esteem (by means of the social self-esteem subscale; Heatherton and Polivy, 1991), and showed, in a correlational design, that procedural fairness influenced outcome fairness judgments most among people low in SSE than among those high in SSE. In a similar vein, De Cremer (2003) showed in two experimental studies that participants low in social self-esteem (i.e., who are the most in need of relational information, Leary and Baumeister, 2000), relative to those high in social self-esteem, exhibited more positive emotional reactions when the leader used consistent procedures rather than inconsistent ones. Taken together, these results thus suggest that procedural fairness as assessed by a general measure (Vermunt *et al.*, 2001) and one specific manipulation (De Cremer, 2003) communicates relational information that has clear implications for the social dimension of people’s self-esteem.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

The purpose of the present research is to further examine this specific relationship between social self-esteem and how fair one considers the treatment one receives from the enacting authority. To date, the *specific* relationship between social self-esteem and fair treatment has not yet been examined in a traditional work setting—Vermunt *et al.* (2001) examined social self-esteem among prisoners, and Brockner *et al.* (1998) examined general self-esteem in an organizational setting—and as such the present study will be conducted among employees working at an organizational setting. Moreover, several reasons can be identified why it is also necessary and important to provide additional evidence for the relationship between social self-esteem and fair treatment in general.

First, to date, very little research has examined the moderating effect of self-esteem, and as mentioned earlier has been relatively ignorant about the fact that a social dimension of the self should be assessed. This call for more research examining the importance of the social self as a moderator aligns well with a large recent literature addressing the importance of the social self and identity motives in social settings (e.g., Sedikides and Brewer, 2001). Research has indeed demonstrated that people's motives, cognitions and affect are determined to a great extent by relational concerns, as witnessed, for example, in people's need to belong (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), need for self-expansion (Aron and Aron, 1986), and tendency to define themselves at different levels of self (personal, relational, and collective identity; e.g., Brewer and Gardner, 1996). Given that relational considerations have been the focus of much recent research in social and organizational psychology, it becomes important to delineate the conditions under which (or the people for whom) relational considerations are likely to be particularly explanatory.

Second, the present research differs from the other three studies (Brockner *et al.*, 1998; De Cremer, 2003; Vermunt *et al.*, 2001) that examined the moderating effect of self-esteem in terms of dependent measures. Because we tested the interaction between social self-esteem and fair treatment in an organizational setting we decided to focus on one important attitudinal variable in organizational behavior research: Organizational commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1997; Mowday *et al.*, 1982). Organizational commitment is a form of caring for and appreciating the organization one works in and includes "internalization, behavioral intentions, and affect" (Ashforth and Mael, 1989, p. 23). As such, organizational commitment has been shown to be an important variable that has considerable influence on organizational outcomes relevant to the organizational welfare like organizational citizenship behavior, employee satisfaction and intentions to stay within the organization (e.g., Allen and Meyer, 2000). In the present research, we will focus on the emotional side of organizational commitment, that is, on affective commitment. An important reason for this is that past empirical research, including meta-analytic work, has shown strong links between affective commitment and organizational justice, especially of the procedural kind (Colquitt *et al.*, 2001; Meyer *et al.*, 2002). At a conceptual level, the relationship between affective commitment and justice as a function of social self-esteem is sensible because self-esteem is largely affective in nature (Baumeister, 1998). This dependent measure is different from those used by Brockner *et al.* (1998): work motivation, intention to remain, organizational identification, and satisfaction. Vermunt *et al.* (2001) measured outcome fairness, whereas De Cremer (2003) measured emotional reactions and willingness to replace the authority.

Third, the observation that procedural fairness influences people's self-esteem rests on the assumption that people assign importance to how fairly they are treated during the interaction. To date, however, the previous studies reported only

measured or manipulated instances of procedures and not directly how fair the interactional treatment was perceived to be. Therefore, in the present research we decided to use a justice scale that is believed to be most closely related to the fairness of treatment, that is, interactional justice (Bies and Moag, 1986). In the present paper, we define interactional justice as the relational element of procedural fairness that focuses more directly on the quality of the treatment that one receives from the enacting authority.⁶ More precisely, this line of thinking aligns well with Tyler and Blader's (2000) suggestion that procedural fairness can be seen as consisting of *formal* instances of procedures enacted by the authority or organization and more *informal* qualities that include the interpersonal treatment between group members when these procedures are enacted. In this way, we focus on the informal quality of procedures.

The following hypotheses were tested. First, we expected that increased perceptions of fair treatment would lead to stronger affective commitment. Second, an interaction between social self-esteem and interactional justice was expected. Specifically, we predicted that the positive association between perceptions of fair treatment and affective commitment would be stronger among employees who are low in social self-esteem than among employees who are high in social self-esteem.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

Human Resource Management of 12 municipalities in the province of South Holland in the Netherlands were asked to assist with a study of leadership. Nine of them agreed to distribute questionnaires at random among employees within their organization. Questionnaires were sent with a cover letter to the intended respondents. The letter explained the alleged purpose of the study and emphasized that participation would be anonymous. Ten days later, a reminder was sent to increase the response rate.

Human Resource Management asked 575 civil servants to participate. A total of 257 questionnaires were sent back, yielding a response rate of 45%. Of the 257 respondents, 58% were male and 42% were female. The mean age was 41.2 years ($SD = 9.4$). Fifteen percent reported having a low level of education, 44% had a medium level, and 41% had a high level of education. Forty-five percent earned a net monthly salary below 1500 Euro, 45% earned between 1500 and 2500 Euro/month, and 10% earned more than 2500 Euro/month.

⁶We are aware that some justice researchers regard interactional justice as independent from procedural fairness (see Bies, 2001; Bies and Moag, 1986; Korsgaard *et al.*, 1998). However, for the present purposes we assume that interactional justice refers to the more informal and interactional element of procedural fairness.

Measures

Social Self-Esteem

To assess state social self-esteem the Dutch translation (Vermunt and Shulman, 1996) of the 7-item state social self-esteem (SSE) scale developed by Heatherton and Polivy (1991) was used. This subscale includes items like "I worry how other people think about me." These items were combined to form one average social self-esteem score (Cronbach's alpha = .83). Items were recoded so that high scores denoted low social self-esteem (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Interactional Justice

To assess perceptions of interactional justice, we based our questions on the recently developed 4-item interactional justice scale of Colquitt (2001). This scale contains items such as "To what extent have you been treated in a polite manner" and "To what extent have you been treated with respect." Responses were given on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). These items were combined to form one average interactional justice score (Cronbach's alpha = .92)

Affective Commitment

To assess perceptions of affective commitment we used three items (taken from Allen and Meyer, 1990): "I feel emotionally attached to [name of the company]," "I feel like I am part of the family at [name of the company]," and "I feel at home with [name of the company]" (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Items were combined to form one average affective commitment score (Cronbach's alpha = .76).

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the study variables are displayed in Table I. To test our hypotheses, a hierarchical regression analysis

Table I. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Affective Commitment, Social Self-Esteem, and Interactional Justice

| | M | SD | AC | SSE | IJ |
|-----------------------|------|------|-------|---------|----|
| Affective commitment | 3.26 | 0.94 | | | |
| Social self-esteem | 2.19 | 0.73 | 0.05 | | |
| Interactional justice | 4.13 | 0.81 | 0.13* | -0.17** | |

Note. N = 257.

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01.

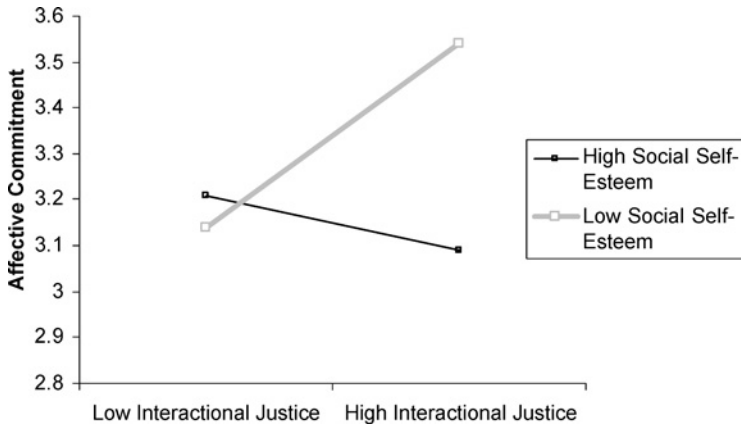


Fig. 1. The relationship between interactional justice and affective commitment as a function of social self-esteem (higher values indicate stronger affective commitment).

was conducted in which affective commitment was predicted by main effect terms (interactional justice and social self-esteem) at Step 1 and the interaction term at Step 2. Following Aiken and West (1991), interactional justice and social self-esteem were centered (i.e., by subtracting the mean from each score) and the interaction term was based on these centered scores. Affective commitment was significantly related to Interactional justice, $\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$ but not to social self-esteem, $\beta = 0.08$, $p < 0.24$. Furthermore, the interaction between Interactional justice and social self-esteem was significant, $\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$ (see Fig. 1). Simple slopes analysis was conducted to further analyze this interaction (Aiken and West, 1991). When social self-esteem was low (one SD below the mean), interactional justice was significantly and positively related to affective commitment, $\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that fair treatment is indeed associated with stronger affective commitment. However, when social self-esteem was high (one SD above the mean) interactional justice was not significantly related to affective commitment, $\beta = -0.01$, $p < 0.90$.

DISCUSSION

The present study shows that perceptions of interactional justice have very different relationships with affective commitment among people who are high versus low in social self-esteem. It was shown that employees' reactions were strongly and positively related to interactional fairness information when they were low in social self-esteem, but not when they were high in social self-esteem. Thus, the present findings provide the first empirical evidence that within

an organizational setting an important moderator of fair treatment is an individual difference variable related to people's sense of self, namely, social self-esteem.

The findings of the present research are important because they are the first (to our knowledge) to empirically demonstrate that differences in level of social self-esteem moderate the effects of interactional justice in an organizational setting. As such, they clearly indicate that perceptions of interactional justice are strongly related to relational concerns. Consequently, the present findings provide insight into the question about why people care about being treated fairly. Indeed, relational models of procedural fairness suggest that the interactional element of procedural fairness (i.e., fair treatment) communicates important relational information regarding one's standing and status within that relationship (Lind, 2001; Tyler and Lind, 1992; Van den Bos and Lind, 2002). As a consequence, procedural fairness is expected to influence one's sense of self-worth (Koper *et al.*, 1993), particularly because self-esteem is believed to reflect the quality of people's interactions with others (see sociometer theory; Leary and Baumeister, 2000). The fact that in the present research the reactions of those employees assumed to be most sensitive about their relationship with their authority, that is, those with low social self-esteem, were influenced most by perceptions of interactional justice points out how important a relational account of procedural fairness can be. More specifically, the present findings indicate that the extent to which leaders treat others fairly when engaging in procedures to make decisions exerts influence on how strongly those in need of relational appreciation (i.e., low in social self-esteem) feel committed to their organization. Now that we have demonstrated that fairness of treatment affects the social dimension of self-esteem, particularly with respect to commitment, future research is needed to examine in greater detail the precise role of self-esteem by focusing on other self-esteem related features such as the stability of self-esteem (see De Cremer and Sedikides, in press). Indeed, research has shown that unstable self-esteem makes people focus on threatening aspects of unpleasant interpersonal events (Waschull and Kernis, 1996) and that these effects interact with a person's level of self-esteem (e.g., Kernis *et al.*, 1989).

These findings are also important when considered in light of Brockner *et al.*'s (2001) suggestion that one way to achieve conceptual progress in the organizational justice literature is by identifying the conditions under which procedural fairness variables are more versus less impactful. By adopting a person \times situation approach, the present research has produced evidence that a relational explanation of procedural fairness in which it is assumed that fair treatment influences people's social self and worth is most appropriate among employees who are less confident about their social position and treatment by others. Although people in general wish to know how they are evaluated socially, it is especially those who are low in social self-esteem who base their self-evaluations on how they are treated by others (De Cremer, 2003; Leary and Baumeister, 2000). Thus, the present approach in

which an individual difference variable was used as a moderator of fair treatment effects can be regarded as useful to the procedural justice literature because it reveals evidence about the type of information that fair treatment communicates and about which individuals could be considered to be most responsive toward variations in fair treatment. Therefore, we hope that other justice researchers will see the benefits of this general approach and apply it to a wider variety of justice phenomena (see e.g., De Cremer, 2002; Brockner *et al.*, 2004).

Another implication of these findings is that they are supportive of recent claims that more attention should be devoted to the specific nature of the relationship between the self and procedural justice (e.g., Brockner *et al.*, 1998; De Cremer, 2003; Brockner *et al.*, 2004; Gilliland, 1994; Shroth and Shah, 2000; Skitka, 2003). Indeed, a large literature within social and organizational psychology has recently addressed the importance of social relationships and settings in constructing and defining people's self-concepts (e.g., Sedikides and Brewer, 2001). That is, although we have known since James's (1890) work that the self is fundamentally relational and social in nature, social psychology has recently become interested in putting this field of inquiry again on the forefront of the research agenda (e.g., Forgas and Williams, 2002). Further motivated by relational explanations advocated by justice researchers it should thus become clear that the specific psychological mechanisms involved in the construction of people's social selves could also play an important role in explaining procedural fairness effects and maybe even more so than we initially anticipated (see De Cremer and Tyler, *in press*).

Furthermore, we have explicitly noted that people's perceptions of procedural fairness depend to a large extent upon the quality of the interpersonal treatment that they receive from the other party. Indeed, the very core of the relational explanation of fair process effects suggests that people's attitudes and behaviors should be influenced by the fairness of their interpersonal treatment (Tyler and Lind, 1992), because this informs people about the quality of their relationships with the other party (see also Tyler and Blader, 2000). In addition, the relational explanation also suggests that the effects of fairness of treatment should be especially pronounced among those who are in need of relational information contributing to their self-worth, that is, among individuals who are low in social self-esteem. We hasten to add, however, that in the present research we adopted the assumption that fairness of treatment represents the interactional element of procedural fairness and as such does not necessarily constitute an independent dimension, as argued by some justice researchers (e.g., Bies and Moag, 1986; Korsgaard *et al.*, 1998). The reason for taking this position is that interpersonal treatment has been traditionally investigated as one element of procedural fairness; in addition, many studies have shown that interpersonal treatment is a key antecedent of general judgments whether the procedure is fair or not (see Tyler and Blader, 2003, for a detailed review). Nevertheless, more research is required to determine

whether procedures and interactional elements can be seen as different or not (or whether their relationship varies across situations and persons) and whether this has implications for the findings observed in the present paper.

Before closing, we wish to note a potential limitation as well as a final strength of the present research. First, our study might be criticized for being correlational in nature (and therefore rendering it mute on matters of causality), for relying on self-reported behavior, and for the fact that all variables were assessed in a single questionnaire (i.e., making common method variance a potential problem). However, it should also be noted that common method variance cannot account for interactions in regression (Evans, 1985). The present findings are in line with recent experimental research demonstrating causal links between social self-esteem concerns and procedural fairness operationalizations (De Cremer, 2003) as well as with prior correlational research (Vermunt *et al.*, 2001). For all these reasons, we feel relatively confident about the validity of the present results.

In sum, the present findings are supportive of our predictions and are in line with recent work emphasizing the importance of procedural fairness and its interactional components in shaping and defining people's self-worth in social settings. This focus is of particular importance to organizations and groups. We have shown that the specific relationship between fairness and self-esteem is a key to promoting desired attitudes such as organizational commitment.

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