

Will school authority be legitimated in the same way when one is involved in unfair situations as when one is not?

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Introduction

The Relational Model of Authority and the Group Value Model (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992) to demonstrate that judgements of procedural/relational justice (which refer to the justice of the procedures and to the quality of the relationship) promote the acceptance of the decisions of authorities more than judgements of distributive justice (which refer to the perception about the justice of the result of the distribution). Based on these models, Gouveia-Pereira, Vala, Palmonari, & Rubini (2003) showed that the more the adolescents perceive school authority as procedurally/relationally just, the more they legitimate it.

Experimental studies showed unfair experiences which happened to one's own self lead to a more negative evaluation of the authority than unfair experiences which happened to other individuals (Lind, Kray & Thompson, 1998). However, Van den Bos and Lind (2001) equally showed that people are also sensitive to the experiences of others.

In the field of distributive justice judgments the role of social comparisons has been considered in the theories of equity (Adams, 1965) and of relative deprivation (Runciman, 1996). More recently, the framework of the Referent Cognitions Theory tried to integrate the comparative judgments into the field of procedural justice. The results of Gouveia-Pereira and colleagues' (2003) study showed that, although the autonomous judgements of justice (absence of explicit comparative referents) strongly influence the legitimacy of school authority, the comparative judgements also influence this

authority. However, there is still not much printed work on both the role of comparisons in judgements of injustice and in procedural judgements. In order to better understand these processes, Gouveia-Pereira, Vala and Correia (in press) made two experimental studies. The results showed, regarding the comparative process, that when the students were the target of injustice and when the comparative judgments are highlighted, students legitimated the teacher's actions less than when the comparisons were not present (study 1). Inversely, in Study 2 when the colleague was the target of injustice, school authorities were less legitimated in situations of injustice regarding distributive aspects and autonomous judgements (comparisons not present). A possible explanation might be the existence of a self defence mechanism (Miedema, Van den Bos & Vermut, 2006) and the participants are driven by defensive motivations. Thus, in this experimental study we analysed the legitimacy of authorities in unfair situations and three comparisons are present. In the situations which the participants are involved (target of justice and injustice in comparison to a colleague) and in the situations which the participants are not involved (they are mere observers of injustice). We hope that the legitimation of school authority will be less in the situations which the participants are not involved (they are mere observers of injustice) and when distributive aspects of justice are highlighted.

Method

Participants: One hundred and twenty nine high school students participated in this study, 73 females and 56 males. The ages of participants ranged from 14 to 18 years ($M=16.54$; $SD= 1.142$).

Experimental Design: An experimental study was conducted with design 2 type of justice judgment (procedural, distributive) X 3 social comparisons processes (participants target of unfairness and classmate target of fairness vs. participants target of fairness and classmate target of unfairness vs. 1 classmate target of unfairness and 1 classmate target of fairness). Participants were randomly assigned to the six different conditions.

Variables and procedure: One of 6 booklets was randomly distributed to our participants. All of them began with the following information "Imagine that you were in the following situation: The last test of one of you had 8 questions that had the same maximum possible score (...)". The instructions which followed differed in each booklet. In the condition where the participants were target of procedural unfairness and the classmate target of fairness, participants were given the following information: "You and your colleague had difficulties understanding the questions.... The teacher explained the doubts your colleague had to him. Her

explanation was clear, she took into consideration your colleague's needs and treated him with care and respect. The teacher did not give you any help". *Dependent variable:* The legitimation of authority of teachers- This measure is based on Tyler (1997) and (Gouveia-Pereira et al. 2005). (Alpha = .76) on a scale of 1 (Totally disagree) to 5 (Totally agree).

After reading the story, the students were asked to answer the questions of legitimation of authority of teachers. In addition they answered four items measuring perceived procedural justice and three items measuring perceived distributive justice, as checks of our manipulations.

Results

We compared the three different stories that aimed to manipulate procedural justice with regard to the level that participants perceived this type of justice. So a one way ANOVA comparing the 3 groups was performed having perception of procedural justice as a dependent measure. Results show no differences, suggesting that independent of the injustice being define in others or one self, participants perceived it in the same degree. Exactly the same happened with perceived distributive justice.

In order to test the main hypothesis of our experiment, perceptions of legitimacy of teacher actions were analysed in an ANOVA defined by the different factors of our design. Two main effects and one interaction emerged. One main effect of the variable "types of judgment" ($F(1,129)=8.094, p=.005$), reveals that the participants in the situations of distributive unfairness legitimized the teachers less ($M=2.10, SD=0.57$), than in the situations of procedural unfairness ($M=2.40, SD=0.85$). Another main effect of the variable "comparative processes" ($F(2,129)=13.699, p=.000$), reveals that the teacher's legitimacy is lower in comparison to where one colleague is target of injustice and another colleague is target of justice ($M=2.02, SD=0.52$), than in the comparison which the participant experienced injustice and the colleague experienced justice ($M=2.10, SD=0.65$) and when the participant experienced justice and colleague experienced injustice ($M=2.63, SD=0.83$).

These main effects qualified by an interaction effect between the type of judgment and the comparative processes ($F(2, 129)=18.781; p<0.01$). When the participants were target of injustice and the colleague target of justice the teacher was less legitimated in a situation of procedural injustice than in a situation of distributive injustice ($M_s = 1.88$ vs $2.31, SD_s = 0.59$ vs 0.65). When the participant was target of justice and the colleague target of injustice the teacher was legitimated less in a situation of distributive injustice than in a situation of procedural injustice ($M_s = 2.07$ vs $3.19, SD_s = 0.56$

vs. 0.66). When one colleague is target of injustice and another colleague is target of justice, the teacher was legitimated less in a situation of distributive injustice than in a situation of procedural injustice (Ms = 1.92 vs. 2.12, SDs = 0.43 vs. 0.59).

Conclusions

The social comparison processes affect the legitimation of authority and perceptions of (in)justice.

In distributive judgments situations, the legitimation of authority was lower, when a colleague was treated unfairly and another was treated fairly, that is, the participants are not involved, as was expected. These results show that participants take into account the needs of colleagues, as obtained by Van den Bos and Lind (2001), but especially when they themselves are not involved. In the situation of procedural judgments, the legitimacy of authority was also lower when the participant was treated unfairly and the colleague fairly, that is, the participants are involved. Instead, the authority was further legitimized when the participant has been treated fairly and not the colleague. The procedures used by the authorities offer information about the respect of the adolescent in the group, which in turn affects their own personal and social identity.

In both situations, the results of this study suggest in fact the existence of a self defence mechanism related to the perception of injustice. Therefore, in unfair situations and when one is not involved, it becomes easier to evaluate the legitimacy of the teacher, than when there is involvement. On the other hand, situations which involve comparative processes (they themselves are unfairly treated) and procedural judgment can lead to a higher level of defense, once the person feels that they are being discriminated by the authority. Concluding, the adolescents use comparative processes as information in their procedural and distributive injustice judgments on legitimation of school authority depending on the involvement or not of participants in the comparative process.

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