

RUNNING HEAD: Trends

Trends in the Social Psychological Study of Justice

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Abstract

Justice is one of the most basic and potentially important social psychological areas of inquiry. The assumption that others will be fair is what makes social cooperation possible. This article provides a brief review of trends, both historical and current, in the social psychological study of justice, and provides an introduction for a special issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Review* devoted to social psychological theorizing and research on the role that justice plays in human affairs. This overview highlights some exciting new directions in justice theorizing and research, including new uses of identity's ties to justice reasoning, increased attention to negative justice and moral emotion, as well as a greater emphasis on integrative and contingent, rather than competing, social psychological models of justice.

Trends in the Social Psychological Study of Justice

Justice research has a rich history in social psychology. Social psychologists cannot determine what is just or unjust, but we can document how people think and feel about justice issues. We can study people's behavior, charting how matters of fairness are associated with various thoughts, feelings, and actions on the part of individuals and groups.

In the four decades that social psychologists have been conducting research on social justice, a number of changes have occurred. During the 1960s and 1970s, the primary guiding metaphor of justice research was that of *homo economicus*. Equity theorists assumed that people's concern with justice was primarily rooted in a desire to maximize their long or short-term self-interests. Social interactions were conceptualized as forms of exchange and the focus was on distributions. Early challenges to the hegemony of equity theory – including Melvin Lerner's (1971) path-breaking work on the justice motive and Morton Deutsch's (1975) insistence that proportionality was only one of several bases for determining justice– exposed some of the limitations of equity theory but still conceived of justice in terms of allocations. The same implicit focus on allocations may be said of Susan Opatow's (e.g., 1994; 1996) important work on the “scope of justice,” work that described how fair-minded people can be cruel to those outside their moral community.

It was during the late 1970s and the 1980s that a concern with procedural justice replaced the exclusive focus on distributive justice. As Thibaut and Walker (1974), Deutsch (1979), and Leventhal (1980; Leventhal, Karuza & Fry, 1980) were among the first to note, people care not only about the content of decisions; they also care about how the decisions are made. A number of studies showed that people will remain attached to their groups and satisfied with the authority figures if they think the authorities have followed fair procedures, even if the

authorities have rendered a decision that adversely affects them (see Tyler & Smith, 1998 for a review).

Considerable justice research during the 1970s, 80s and 90s primarily sought to gauge the relative importance of distributive and procedural justice concerns for people in a variety of settings. Meanwhile, other research looked instead at the reasons why procedural justice matters. Under the strong leadership of Tom Tyler and Alan Lind (e.g., Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1989; Tyler & Lind, 1992), many researchers documented that procedures communicate important information about social worth and value to involved parties. People need to feel they are valued and respected members of the group, and they need to take pride in their group membership. A number of studies have found that people feel that even unfavorable outcomes are fair so long as they are treated with courtesy and respect.

Now, in the new millennium, more shifts in justice theorizing and research appear to be underway. Several researchers have become cognizant of the contingent nature of procedural justice. As happened earlier with equity theory, procedural justice studies have increasingly come to recognize that procedural fairness matters in some situations and for some subjects and not in or for others. Meanwhile, other researchers are seeking to enumerate the properties of procedural justice. Still other researchers are moving beyond what might be called “positive justice” to examine the reactions of people to situations in which a harm has been done or an injustice has been committed. How people react cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally to unfairness is currently a topic of intense research activity.

The goal of this special issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Review* is to present samples of some of the current theorizing in the social psychology of justice. The issue includes some newcomers to the field, like Julie Exline and her colleagues, some established scholars,

like Carolyn Hafer and Linda Skitka, and some of the pioneers, like Melvin Lerner, Faye Crosby, Tom Tyler, and John Darley. In a sense, then, our issue contains the current conceptualizations of three generations of scholars.

When do people care about social justice? The paper by Linda Skitka attempts to answer this and other basic questions. Specifically, she proposes an Accessible Identity Model (AIM) that predicts that people will be more likely to think about justice when identity concerns are particularly salient. The AIM also posits that people's definitions of what is fair or unfair will depend on which aspect of identity—the material, social or personal/moral— dominates their working self-concept. Different justice norms, values, and expectations are predicted to be linked in memory to different aspects of identity, and therefore will be more cognitively accessible in contexts that prime different identity-relevant goals or values.

Like Skitka, Susan Clayton and Susan Opatow similarly focus on the links between justice and identity concerns. Clayton and Opatow argue that “who” is included in one's scope of justice will shape people's justice reasoning in important ways. Whereas Skitka focuses on different levels of individual identity (how people see themselves as individuals with material, social, and personal standing), Clayton and Opatow focus instead on differences that arise from conceiving of oneself as an individual or as a representative of a broader group (e.g., as a rancher or environmentalist). Their article explores the contours of justice reasoning when one's individual interests might be at odds with one's sense of self as part of a larger group. Just as it is important to consider differences in individual perspective, Clayton and Opatow review evidence that to understand how people reason about fairness, it is important to know whether people are taking the perspective of themselves as individuals or of as more morally inclusive groups (e.g., women, all of humanity, or all living things).

Carolyn Hafer and Jim Olson review research on the scope of justice, or the boundaries people seem to draw between those who are covered by considerations of justice and those that are not. As a construct, the “scope of justice” has been invoked to help account for a host of phenomena such as mass internment, genocide, and slavery. Experimental evidence has seemed to corroborate models about the scope of justice. Hafer and Olson point to a number of possible alternative explanations, however, for these experimental findings and articulate other interpretations of the historical evidence than the ones originally articulated by Opatow (e.g., 1994; 1996). Hafer and Olson note that people outside the scope of justice sometimes receive positive outcomes, and people within the scope of justice sometimes are harmed—and moreover, are harmed in the name of justice. In short, conceptions of justice also involve punishment, vengeance, and harm, regardless of where the lines of the scope of justice are drawn. Hafer and Olson present an agenda for future research that can help to tease apart when harm is done because the harmed ones lie outside the harm-doer’s moral community and when harm is done because, on the contrary, the harmed ones lie within it.

What about when harm has already been done? John Darley and Thane Pittman’s article presents a review of the retributive justice literature, an area of inquiry that is gaining increasing momentum in the justice literature. Their review of the literature leads to an integrated model of retributive justice. Specifically, the model proposes that the attribution people make for why a perpetrator inflicted harm will lead to different levels of moral outrage. Accidental, negligent, and intentional harm will lead to respectively higher levels of moral outrage. People’s level of moral outrage in response to harm is used as a psychological barometer that predicts what is needed for justice to be done. Darley and Pittman’s model predicts that low levels of moral outrage lead to low perceived need for punishment, whereas moderate levels of moral outrage

lead people to demand compensatory reactions to make the victim “whole”, or to return him or her to a pre-harm state. High levels of moral outrage lead people to feel that justice requires not only compensation, but also retribution, such as payment of punitive in addition to compensatory damages.

Retribution is not the only possible reaction to harm. Research on forgiveness represents another emerging area of psychological inquiry that has been gaining momentum in recent years. Julie Exline, Everett Worthington, Jr., Peter Hill, and Michael McCullough review recent trends in law, management, philosophy, theology, and psychology that point to forgiveness as being increasingly discussed as a viable alternative to retribution. Although the very young field of forgiveness studies can be a minefield that can conflate “ought” with “is”, and prescription with description, these authors provide an objective review of the research to date on the precursors and consequences of forgiveness, and outline five questions important for future research, including: (a) the development of a clear and consistent definition of forgiveness, (b) exploration of whether forgiveness encourages or deters future offenses, (c) whether people believe there are some offenses that cannot, or perhaps should not, be forgiven, (d) exploration of the motivational underpinnings of the desire to forgive, and (e) exploring whether variables that affect perceptions of justice or injustice similarly relate to people’s desire to forgive.

The article by Tom Tyler and Steven Blader looks at justice issues less from the point of view of the actor and more from the point of view of those who are, as it were, “acted upon.” Tyler and Blader review the current literature on procedural justice and integrate the insights of that now vast literature into a revised model of procedural fairness, the Group Engagement Model (GEM). This version of the model, like its predecessors, focuses on the role of fair treatment in validating people’s social identities. Whether people’s social identities are validated

or invalidated by fair or unfair procedures, in turn, plays an important role in people's subsequent thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Tyler and Blader's paper extends previous work on procedural justice by differentiating between the consequences of procedural treatment for voluntary and involuntary cooperation with authorities. It also proposes that people's reactions to material outcomes do not directly affect variables like cooperation, but rather influence social identity that, in turn, affects cooperation.

Much of the vitality of social justice research derives from the pan-disciplinary nature of the research. Since the days of J. Stacy Adams (1965), justice researchers have combined organizational with social psychology. For example, scholars like Alan Lind and Tom Tyler (e.g., Lind & Tyler, 1988), Gerald Greenberg (e.g., Greenberg, 1993; Greenberg & Wiethoff, 2001), and Rob Folger and Russell Cropanzano (e.g., Folger & Cropanzano, 1998) have stepped outside the ivory tower and gathered data legal settings, businesses, and other organizational contexts to test various hypotheses about the psychology of justice. In the tradition of pan-disciplinary research on justice, Faye Crosby and Jamie Franco seek to develop insights into social justice theorizing by looking closely at the field of public policy. Rather than working deductively from theory to generate predictions for research, furthermore, Crosby and Franco work inductively from a controversial social problem to arrive at important new insights that can guide subsequent justice theorizing and research. Specifically, Crosby and Franco note that for all the attention lavished on issues of procedural justice, little thought has been given to what may be the most basic question of all: How can those who have been privileged by a system accommodate to changes system rules, given that neither they nor anyone else is operating in the Rawlsian "veil of ignorance" when the rules are changed?

Like Crosby and Franco, Dave Schroeder, Julie Steel, Andria Woodell, and Alicia Bembenek provide a novel perspective on justice theorizing and research by bridging different areas of substantive inquiry. Specifically, Schroeder et al. see the conflict between individual and group outcomes that lies at the heart of social dilemmas as prime examples of the contexts where questions of justice and fairness are especially likely to emerge. Their review of the social dilemma literature provides important insight into the conditions when people will be more likely to be concerned about distributive, procedural, retributive, and restorative justice. Their review illustrates the benefits of studying justice in contexts that allow relationships to emerge and that include opportunities for the *social* and *interactive* aspects of justice decision-making to unfold, rather than relying exclusively on single-shot encounters or decisions to inform justice theorizing and research.

Finally, the capstone article of this special issue is one by Melvin Lerner, who provides a historical review and critique of the justice literature from his unique position as one of the fields' senior statesmen. His article outlines some cautionary messages for justice researchers. Specifically, he argues that justice theorists need to take a more nuanced look at whether experimental manipulations or measures arouse or tap a set of justice-based cognitions, or instead, simply elicit impression managed adherence to normative conventions.

Visible Shifts in Justice Theorizing and Research

Taken together, the articles included in this special issue illustrate some developments in the social psychological study of justice. One clear trend is the concern with identity. Another is the attention to what might be called “negative justice” – i.e., what happens after wrongs have occurred. A third is increased attention given to contingent models, that is, to models that specify the boundary conditions when different considerations are likely to be especially

important in people's conceptions of justice. A fourth development that is discernable is the return to emotion. For a while, all of social psychology appeared to concentrate on cold cognitions; today feelings about justice (and about the self and others in justice-related situations) are understood as representing important components of the social psychology of justice. For example, the papers by Darley and Pittman and Exline et al. clearly reveal the important role of moral emotions in how people think about justice. Gaining a better understanding of moral emotion more generally, as well as how it relates to the social psychology of justice, is an exciting new frontier for justice researchers to explore.

The papers in this issue also reveal important intersections between justice theorizing and other areas of social psychological inquiry, and illustrate how greater cross-boundary research can facilitate work in justice, as well as other areas of social psychology. For example, research and theorizing that focuses on contemporary social problems, like affirmative action, are especially important in revealing new insights into both the psychological foundations of people's objections to affirmative action, and because it can reveal important and previously neglected gaps in theory, such as rule change as a procedural justice issue. Relating social dilemma research and theories to justice provides another excellent example of how bridging different areas of inquiry can do much to inform each one.

Our ultimate goal in putting together this issue was to fan the flames of interest in social psychological justice theory and research, and to showcase the many new developments that are emerging in the social psychological study of questions relating to justice and fairness. We hope for a two-fold outcome. First, we hope that the research agendas of social psychologists currently doing research in justice will benefit from incorporating some of the innovations in justice theorizing that this issue presents into their current thinking and work. Second, we hope

that social psychologists working in other areas will have an increased recognition of the importance of justice as an area of social psychological inquiry. To a considerable degree, negotiating how the benefits and burdens of social cooperation are to be allocated across persons—the fundamental focus of justice theory and research—is one of the most central of all social psychological questions. We therefore hope that this special issue facilitates a broader recognition of the importance of justice as a social psychological construct worthy of both additional study and inclusion as a chapter in social psychology textbooks.

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