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# **The Effects of Interpersonal and Informational Justice on Perceptions of an Authority Figure**

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## **ABSTRACT**

There are several traits and characteristics that people may use to judge an authority based on how that authority acts and treats those under him or her. However, are there times when an authority can influence his or her own reputation among subordinates simply by the type of task he or she provides, or the level of information he or she presents? Prior evidence (Bies & Moag, 1986) has suggested that perceptions of authorities are influenced by a number of qualities. The purpose of this experiment was to test how the nature of a task and whether a rationale is provided for the task will affect the perception of interpersonal and informational fairness in relation to an authority figure. The findings suggest that authorities are indeed judged by the tasks they present and whether a rationale is given to explain those tasks.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Imagine yourself in the typical classroom setting. What determines your perceptions of the professor? What determines how he or she is judged, liked, viewed as fair or unfair, or a good teacher? Imagine yourself in the workplace, what factors affect the perception you have of your boss? Are these perceptions based on the type of work he or she assigns, or are the perceptions based on your boss's personality, or on the information your boss chooses to provide or not provide?

Authority exists in all forms of social institutions, whether it be government, police, religious, voluntary or involuntary, job-oriented, or even club or team oriented. Authorities in government receive their positions by force, election, inheritance, connections and the like, but once established they are

there to make decisions that others must follow, and often times conflict with the desires of individuals. Research (Kouzes & Posner, 2002) concerning the quality of leadership has indicated that followers desire leaders who “care” about those individuals they are leading. Other characteristics of quality leaders include “respect,” “recognition,” “encouragement,” and “trust”. Their findings suggest that when leaders display these traits, not only does compliance increase and defection decrease, but also productivity seems to rise (Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

What if an authority figure does not exhibit these valued traits? When an authority’s acts are perceived as unfair the authority has committed a violation of “interactional justice,” or the degree to which an authority and his or her decision making is viewed as fair (Bies & Moag, 1986). Interactional justice is composed of two elements, those being interpersonal fairness and informational fairness (Bies & Moag, 1986). Interpersonal fairness can be defined as the extent to which a person shows both respect and dignity to others. Informational fairness is the degree to which explanations are given to subordinates in regards to events presented, as well as the subordinates’ level of satisfaction with the explanations. When the authority provides an explanation to the task presented, those involved believe that some sort of “moral obligation” has been achieved and that they have been treated also with interpersonal fairness (Jones & Skarlicki, 2005). The purpose of this research is to extend the study of interpersonal and informational justice in regards to an authority, and to explore how perceptions of an authority are related to both the respectfulness of the requested task as well as the amount of information provided.

Specifically, we predicted that participants under the authority of an experimenter would perceive the authority negatively when a disrespectful task was required of the participant and/or no information was provided as a means to explain the rationale for the task.

*Hypothesis 1:* A lack of interpersonal fairness results in a negative perception of an authority.

*Hypothesis 2:* A lack of informational fairness results in a negative perception of an authority.

Throughout the experiment the authority figure (i.e., the experimenter) treated all participants in the same socially pleasant manner, manipulating only which task he or she asked them to perform and whether participants

were told the reasoning behind it. Specifically, in order to manipulate interpersonal justice, some participants were asked to count to twenty as their task and others were asked to jump and sing a children's song. At the time of the requested task, the experimenter either provided or failed to provide a rationale for the task as a manipulation of informational justice. It is predicted that an authority (i.e., the experimenter) will be judged by not only the type of task he or she asks subordinates to do, but also whether he or she provides an explanation for the task.

## **METHOD**

### **PARTICIPANTS AND DESIGN**

Participants consisted of student volunteers from Georgia College & State University. Psychology majors were offered extra credit points for participation. Participants were distributed evenly across a 2 (Interpersonal Justice: Present vs. Absent) x 2 (Informational: Present vs. Absent) between-subject experimental design. Participants were run one at a time in each experimental session. Upon arrival to the laboratory each participant was given a test, asked to perform a task, and take a brief survey questionnaire concerning their experiences with the experimenter.

At the beginning of each session all participants were told by the experimenter's assistant that the study was on test-taking performance under varying conditions. At this point the experimenter entered the room as the assistant left. The individual was introduced as the experimenter and said the following:

Hello, today you have agreed to participate in an assessment of testing performance. When I say to begin you will answer the first ten questions of your test, and then immediately stop before going on. Please take your hands off the mouse and keyboard and look up when you have finished the first five questions. When you have finished the first five questions you will be asked to perform a brief task. You may either comply or not comply with the task given. But I am here however in your best interest, and to make sure you get your extra credit points of course.

At this point, each participant was then given a brief test (see Appendix 1), consisting of ten multiple choice questions involving math, history, and

general knowledge questions that were all irrelevant to the experiment, and not to be judged or graded. After the first five questions were completed participants were asked to stop to be given the experimenter-provided task. In the Interpersonal Justice-Present conditions the experimenter asked the students to, "Please stop and count to twenty out loud." Alternatively, in the Interpersonal Justice-Absent conditions the experimenter asked the students to:

Please stop. Now get up and do twenty jumping jacks, while you are doing the jumping jacks please sing the Barney Song. The lyrics are as follows, 'I love you, you love me, we're a happy family. With a great big kiss and hug from me to you, won't you say you love me too?'

After the task was described the manipulation of Informational Justice was performed. Specifically in the Informational Justice-Present conditions, participants were told, "Studies have shown that a brief interruption and a cognitive switch [coupled with physical stress] during test taking can increase performance." In the Informational Justice-Absent conditions no explanation concerning the task was given.

Once the tasks were completed, or refused, the students were then asked to complete the test. Students were told to stop and signal when they were finished. When the participant had completed the test, the experimenter left saying the following, "Thank you for your time and participation. Please stay and complete a brief questionnaire on your experiences during the exam." The experimenter then left the room, and the assistant entered to administer the experimenter survey (see Appendix 2), which included the major dependent measures. Upon completion of the dependent measures, participants were fully debriefed, thanked, and dismissed.

## **RESULTS**

Principal analyses on various dependent measures included 2 (Interpersonal Justice: Present vs. Absent) x 2 (Informational Justice: Present vs. Absent) between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVA) and correlational analyses.

### **Manipulation checks**

Interpersonal fairness refers to the degree to which authority figures express respect to others. As a means of determining whether individuals

perceived a different amount of respect by the authority depending upon the experimental conditions, an ANOVA was conducted on the measure of respect. Results indicated a main effect of Interpersonal Justice and participants reported viewing the experimenter as more respectful in the Present conditions ( $M = 8.23$ ) in which participants only had to count to 20, versus the Absent conditions ( $M = 7.43$ ) in which participants had to jump and sing a song,  $F(1, 56) = 4.54, p < .05$ . There was no main effect for Informational Justice and no interaction.

Related to the notion of displaying respect for others, participants were also asked how embarrassing the experimenter's task was, with the belief that asking others to do embarrassing tasks may be somewhat demeaning and disrespectful. As predicted, there was a significant negative correlation between the perceived respectfulness of the experimenter and the degree to which the task was embarrassing,  $r(58) = -.31, p < .02$ , indicating that the more embarrassing the task, the less the experimenter was perceived as respectful.

In addition, an ANOVA on the report of the degree to which the task was embarrassing resulted in a main effect of Interpersonal Justice and participants reported that the task in which they only had to count (in the Interpersonal Justice Present conditions) was significantly less embarrassing ( $M = 2.73$ ) than the task in which they had to jump and sing in the Interpersonal Justice Absent conditions ( $M = 5.83$ ),  $F(1, 56) = 20.29, p < .001$ . There was no main effect for Informational Justice and no interaction.

The other manipulation of Informational Justice was also checked and as a means of determining whether participants correctly perceived differences in Informational Justice between the Present and Absent conditions, participants were asked to report how informative the experimenter was during the experiment. Interestingly, there was not a main effect for Informational Justice, nor was there a main effect for Interpersonal Justice or an interaction, all  $p$ 's  $> .05$ .

However, participants were also asked to indicate the extent to which the experimenter's task was relevant, which could be affected by the experimenter explaining why the additional task (of counting or jumping) needed to be performed. The relationship between the measure of informativeness and relevance of the task was significant,  $r(58) = .46, p < .001$ , indicating that participants could be perceiving the task as more relevant when the experimenter provided more information about the task. An ANOVA of the

measure of relevance actually indicated both a main effect of Interpersonal Justice and a main effect for Informational Justice, but no interaction. Specifically, participants believed the task of counting (in the Interpersonal Justice Present conditions) was more relevant ( $M = 4.90$ ) than the task of jumping and singing ( $M = 3.43$  in the Interpersonal Justice Absent conditions),  $F(1, 56) = 6.29, p < .02$ . In addition, the main effect for Informational Justice suggested that participants believed the additional task they did to be more relevant when information about the reason for the task was provided to them in the Informational Justice Present conditions ( $M = 5.07$ ) compared to the Informational Justice Absent conditions ( $M = 3.27$ ),  $F(1, 56) = 9.47, p = .003$ .

### **Perceptions of the authority figure**

Participants were asked to report the extent to which they believed that the experimenter was fair and an ANOVA indicated that there was only a marginally significant main effect for Interpersonal Justice with participants reporting that the experimenter was consistently perceived as fair (i.e., participants reported on a 1-9 scale where 1 = *not at all fair* and 9 = *extremely fair* scale) and somewhat more fair if the experimenter only asked them to count ( $M = 8.03$ ) versus jump and sing ( $M = 7.23$ ),  $F(1, 56) = 3.35, p = .072$ . There was no main effect for Informational Justice and no interaction.

Perceptions of kindness of the authority figure were also measured and results indicated that there was a main effect for Informational Justice. Participants perceived the authority as more kind if the experimenter explained the reason for the additional task ( $M = 7.73$  in the Interpersonal Justice Present conditions) than if the experimenter did not provide an explanation ( $M = 6.47$  in the Interpersonal Justice Absent conditions),  $F(1, 56) = 6.33, p < .02$ .

### **Additional perceptions**

Other interesting, although secondary findings include results concerning participants' perceptions of whether the experimenter was "truly acting in your best interests" as well as perceptions of whether the additional task of counting or jumping and singing was unnecessary. An ANOVA on the measure of perceptions of whether the experimenter was acting in the participants' best interests indicated that the perceptions depended upon the type

of task the participant was asked to do. There was a main effect for Interpersonal Justice and participants in the Present conditions (who were asked to count) reported that they thought the experimenter was acting to a greater extent in their best interests ( $M = 6.47$ ) as compared to participants in the Interpersonal Justice Absent conditions who had to jump and sing ( $M = 5.33$ ),  $F(1, 56) = 4.59, p < .04$ . There was no main effect for Informational Justice and no interaction.

Finally, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they thought that the additional experimenter-given task was unnecessary on a scale of 1 = *not at all* to 9 = *extremely*. An ANOVA resulted in a main effect for Informational Justice and participants who were not provided information about the reason for the additional task (i.e., that it helps because it allows for a “cognitive switch”) reported that the task was more unnecessary ( $M = 6.03$  in the Informational Justice Absent conditions) compared to those participants who were given an explanation for the task ( $M = 4.30$  in the Informational Justice Present conditions),  $F(1, 56) = 6.67, p < .02$ . There was no main effect for Interpersonal Justice and no interaction.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **General Findings**

In this study we explored how the task presented and the information provided affects participants' perceptions of an authority. Several measures indicated that the perception of the authority could be manipulated by the task presented and the information provided. For example, the individuals perceived the authority as less respectful when they were asked to perform the embarrassing task of jumping and singing as compared to only counting to twenty out-loud. Interestingly, the students did not perceive a difference in the level of how informative the authority was when given an explanation of the task or not. However, students did believe that the task they were asked to do (counting or jumping and singing) was more relevant when information (i.e., a rationale) was provided.

As far as perceptions of the authority figure, evaluations of fairness appeared to be affected by the type of task (i.e., counting or singing) requested. When the authority explained the reason for the additional task, students rated the authority as more kind and thought the task was more necessary, as

compared to when no information about the task was provided. The students also varied in the degree in which they believed that the authority had their “best interests” in mind, indicating a more negative perception when they were asked to jump and sing as compared to count to twenty out-loud.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this research include the laboratory setting that it was performed in. Participants may have experienced an assumed reason for whatever task they were presented with while in a laboratory setting. The fact that students were aware of the experimental setting may have influenced their willingness to comply and accept the task given, even if embarrassing or disrespectful. All but three participants complied with the embarrassing task (i.e., jumping and singing) presented when asked. Further research could be performed in a more natural setting, or a lab setting with a scripted natural setting. For example, classic research by Orne (1962) has suggested that individuals will perform almost any task that is asked of them in an experimental setting.

### **Implications**

Authorities can ascertain several implications from the findings of this research. For example, it is notable that all but three participants complied with the embarrassing task presented when asked, showing that the aversive stimulus did not necessarily lead to defection. So although the students did create negative perceptions of the authority based on the task the experimenter presented, the majority still complied with that task.

It is possible that those in a position of authority in a classroom, work, or other settings may find that their subordinates’ perceptions of the authority may in fact be related to the types of tasks the authority is presenting and not actually the authority’s own personality and qualities. In addition the reasoning and information the authority provides can also affect how they are perceived by their subordinates. Overall, authorities must be aware that there is more to generating a positive perception (and therefore greater productivity, Kouzes & Posner, 2002) than their demeanor; and that they are judged not only by their own character, but the type of work that needs to be performed and the explanations provided.

**APPENDIX 1**

**Test-Taking Performance Measures**

1. At Mushroom's Pizza restaurant, two slices and five orders of rolls cost the same as four slices and two orders of rolls. If the restaurant charges \$1.50 for a single order of rolls, how much does it charge for two slices?
  - A. 2.25
  - B. 3.00
  - C. 4.50
  - D. 5.00
  - E. 6.00
  
2. Choose the antonym to "HONESTY"
  - A. validity
  - B. disrepute
  - C. resolution
  - D. failure
  - E. mendacity
  
3. AIRPLANE : HANGAR ::
  - A. music : orchestra
  - B. money : vault
  - C. finger : hand
  - D. tree : farm
  - E. insect : ecosystem
  
4. Throughout his reign King Henry VIII was married \_\_\_\_\_ different times.
  - A. six
  - B. seven
  - C. four
  - D. eight
  - E. five

5. The number 123 is divisible evenly by which number?
- A. 9
  - B. 7
  - C. 6
  - D. 8
  - E. 3

**PLEASE STOP BEFORE CONTINUING ON TO THE NEXT PAGE**

6. Which of the following is not a system of psychology?
- A. Structuralism
  - B. Behaviorism
  - C. Functionalism
  - D. Psychoanalysis
  - E. Gestalt
7. What is the capital of Missouri?
- A. Kansas City
  - B. Branson
  - C. St. Louis
  - D. Jefferson City
  - E. Jackson
8. Who was the fourth president of the United States?
- A. Thomas Jefferson
  - B. John Adams
  - C. James Madison
  - D. John Quincy Adams
  - E. Andrew Jackson

9. Currently, there are how many U.S. states?
- A. 50
  - B. 51
  - C. 49
  - D. In debate
10. If a man were to say he only gives directions using cardinal directions, then he tells you to go “southeast,” would this man be a liar?”
- A. Yes
  - B. No

**APPENDIX 2**

**Experimenter Survey**

How informative was the experimenter?

Not at all  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
Extremely

How kind was the experimenter?

Not at all  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
Extremely

How fair was the experimenter?

Not at all  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
Extremely

How respectful was the experimenter?

Not at all  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
Extremely

Do you think that the experimenter's task was relevant?

Not at all  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
Extremely

Do you think the experimenter was truly acting in your best interests?

Not at all  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
Extremely

Do you think that the experimenter's task was unnecessary?

Not at all  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
Extremely

Do you believe that the experimenter's task was embarrassing?

Not at all  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
Extremely

Do you think the experimenter violated a sense of "justice?"

Not at all  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
Extremely

\*\*If you responded with a 1, 2, 3, or 7, 8, or 9 to question number 9 please explain why or why not.

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