Disadvantaged Group Responses to Perceived Inequality: From Passive Acceptance to Collective Action

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ABSTRACT. Two experiments using the same paradigm were conducted to examine when members of a disadvantaged group will accept their situation, take individual action, or engage in collective action. In both experiments, Canadian undergraduate subjects received feedback that they had been unsuccessful in their attempt to gain entrance into a high status group. Experiment 1 involved a justice manipulation in which the main hypothesis was that collective action would be associated with procedural injustice, whereas distributive injustice would lead to individualistic action. The main hypothesis of Experiment 2 was that collective action would be instigated by those who are extremely close to gaining entry to the high status group. Although only partial support was obtained for the hypotheses, it was possible to specify conditions that discriminate between individual and collective action.

UNDERSTANDING AND PREDICTING the reaction of disadvantaged group members to the inequalities they perceive is a major challenge for students of intergroup relations. Three broad categories of responses figure prominently in real-world contexts: (a) an apparent acceptance of one's disadvantaged position, (b) attempts at individual upward mobility, and (c) the

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instigation of collective action. These categories of responses have profoundly different societal implications, and yet current social psychological theories of intergroup relations have not formulated precise predictions about the conditions that give rise to these different reactions. Beyond this, the issue of which individuals will adopt each of these possible alternatives is neglected by current theories of intergroup relations.

The various justice theories, including equity theory (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978), distributive justice theory (Homans, 1961), and just world theory (Lerner, 1977), do distinguish between apparent acceptance of injustice and some active response to it by individuals, but because of their individualistic emphasis no collective response alternative is considered. Moreover, the range of restoration strategies considered does not include the exit option (Hirschman, 1970), which can involve an individual leaving a disadvantaged group to become a member of a more advantaged group. Exiting is a theoretically important alternative because it is a common response in intergroup contexts where social mobility is possible.

Relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976; Davis, 1959; Gurr, 1970; Runciman, 1966) focuses on the feelings of discontent that arise when individuals make upward social comparisons. Rarely do studies make any attempt to link feelings of discontent with actual behavior and the few attempts that have been made (e.g., Martin, in press) have generally failed to establish any systematic relationship. This has prompted certain resource mobilization theorists to advocate a shift in attention away from social psychology, to political and economic theories, in order to improve our understanding of collective action (see McCarthy & Zald, 1979).

Perhaps part of the disappointment in psychological theories, such as relative deprivation, arises simply because they have not addressed the issue of collective behavior directly. With few exceptions (e.g., Crosby, 1982; Dion, in press; Guimond & Dubé-Simard, 1983; Martin, in press; Runciman, 1966; Vanneman & Pettigrew, 1972) relative deprivation has not concerned itself with collective or "fraternal" deprivation and has paid even less attention to examining the relationship between the cognitive and emotional dimensions of relative deprivation and their behavioral consequences.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is more explicit in describing the various individual and collective responses that disadvantaged groups might make in the face of inequality. Specifically, it is argued that disadvantaged group members will accept their situation if the intergroup situation is stable and perceived as legitimate. Any perceived instability or illegitimacy will lead disadvantaged group members to recognize "cognitive alternatives" to the existing intergroup relationship, thus motivating attempts at individual upward social mobility, or collective attempts to change the existing status relationship between the groups. Beyond identifying the perception of cognitive alternatives as the necessary condition that will prompt some form of

response, Tajfel and Turner (1979) made no predictions about the precise conditions required for different forms of individual or collective behavior. Moreover, there were no attempts to predict the particular individual members of a group that might instigate either individual or collective action.

Taylor and McKirnan (1984) proposed a five-stage model of intergroup relations that specified the conditions under which members of disadvantaged groups will tolerate existing conditions, take individualistic action, or instigate collective action. According to the model, the perception of injustice is associated with members of disadvantaged groups instigating some form of action designed to change their relative situation. Thus, perceived injustice is central to this model, as it is to the equity, relative deprivation, and social identity theories. The five-stage model also incorporates the distinction between distributive and procedural injustice, which has been discussed widely in the justice literature (e.g., Austin, 1979; Folger, 1977; Mark, 1985; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Distributive justice is concerned with resource distribution among individuals. Procedural justice involves the manner in which the distribution is arrived at. These two forms of justice can operate independently, such that a just distribution can arise from an unjust procedure and an unjust distribution may result from a procedure that is just.

A central assumption entailed in the five-stage model is that questions of distributive justice involve individual differences, whereas procedural justice concerns the collectivity. This leads to the prediction that members of disadvantaged groups will engage in collective action when unjust procedures are perceived and will take individual action when the focus of perceived injustice is distributive.

Taylor and McKirnan (1984) made a second set of proposals, which were designed to differentiate between the responses of different disadvantaged group members. They proposed that the first response of disadvantaged group members is individualistic in the form of attempts by individuals at upward social mobility. Only when their attempts fail is collective action initiated. Only certain disadvantaged group members, however, will individually attempt upward social mobility in order to gain entrance into a high status group. This process will be initiated by those disadvantaged group members who are closest to the advantaged group in terms of the necessary entrance criteria, such as specialized skills and education level.

Disadvantaged individuals who are close to gaining entrance but who are refused entry on what they perceive to be unjust procedures will, it is hypothesized, initiate collective action. They perceive that the only mechanism for raising their own personal status is by raising the status of their entire group. Those who are close but fail to gain entrance to the advantaged group on what they perceive to be legitimate grounds will take individualistic action. Finally, it was hypothesized that those who are not close to gaining entry to the advantaged group, and particularly those who perceive their position to be justly

determined, will accept their disadvantaged status. These hypotheses are also consistent with premises central to the sociological theory of elites (Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1935). In elite theory terms, all societies are governed by elites and in conditions where entrance into the elite is closed, it is the most talented members of the non-elite who will form a counter-elite and challenge the existing elite.

Two separate experiments were conducted to test the hypotheses derived from the five-stage model about distributive as compared to procedural justice and how close a person is to having the necessary qualifications for entry into a high status group. Both experiments used the same paradigm, which attempted to reproduce in the laboratory certain essential features of the North American "meritocracy" ideology. Thus, participants began "at the bottom" as members of a low status group and were placed in a situation whereby moving from membership in the low status group to the high status group was both desirable and possible, based on a performance criteria.

Experiment 1

Method

Subjects. The participants were 40 male and female undergraduate student volunteers from various departments other than psychology. None were familiar with psychological experiments.

Materials and procedure. Subjects participated individually or in small groups but were required to work independently. They first received tape-recorded instructions describing the details of the procedure. They were told that the experiment was a test of their ability to make effective decisions about people, an important skill for those aspiring to any high status role or leadership position, but one that is not specific to any particular training or profession. It was explained that, just like in the real world, they would "begin at the bottom" as a member of the "unsophisticated decision making group." Each subject would be given the chance to perform a decision making task where their ability and effort could gain them entrance into the higher status "sophisticated decision making group."

The motivation for subjects to perform well was: (a) association with a high status group whose members had already proven themselves to be perceptive decision makers; (b) it was members of the sophisticated decision making group who set the decision making task, assessed performance, and made the ultimate decision as to who was permitted to join their group; and (c) members of the sophisticated group had access to greater rewards in the form of a \$100 lottery, whereas members of the unsophisticated decision

making group were limited to a \$10 lottery (in fact, all subjects participated in \$100 lotteries). These motivating conditions were extremely effective in the sense that subjects worked very hard on the test case and were highly anxious about their results.

After receiving the initial instructions, subjects were given 15 min to read and answer questions about a criminal case that involved a stabbing. Their answers were taken by the experimenter to another room where ostensibly a panel of three members of the sophisticated decision making group would assess their performance and render a judgment about whether they had succeeded in gaining entrance to the sophisticated group. The experimenter returned to wait with the subjects while the panel were presumably making their assessment. During this waiting period, the two justice manipulations were introduced.

Distributive justice. Distributive justice was manipulated by presenting the subjects, during the waiting period, with model answers to the questions for the criminal case, supposedly prepared by a member of the sophisticated group. For the "just condition," subjects received an excellent model answer prepared in fact by the experimenter. Pilot testing indicated that this model answer was credible but nevertheless longer and more elaborate than subjects could match within the time limit. Thus, when they received feedback indicating that they had been unsuccessful in their attempt to pass into the sophisticated decision making group, their answers relative to the model would indicate that a just decision had been made.

For the "unjust condition," subjects were presented with what pilot testing showed to be a very poor model answer, one which was presumably far worse than the one prepared by the subject.

Procedural justice. The manipulation of procedural justice was also introduced while subjects were waiting for the results to their answers. They were given a sheet that described in detail the decision-making procedures of the sophisticated group. For the just procedure it was explained that (a) the subject's answer was being evaluated by three members of the sophisticated decision making group who had already demonstrated exceptional decision making ability; (b) the evaluation would be made on the basis of four criteria (objectivity, common sense, persuasive style, and attention to detail); and (c) the subject needed a score of at least 8.5 out of 10 in order to be accepted into the sophisticated decision making group.

The unjust procedure involved explaining to the subjects that their answers were supposed to be marked on the four criteria described previously but that it had been the experimenter's experience that the sophisticated group members tended to use other, more subjective criteria when marking answers. Specifically, subjects in this condition were warned that their mark could be

influenced by their sex, the length of their answers, or how their personality happened to fit in with the sophisticated group.

In order to further manipulate procedural fairness, after the criminal case was completed all subjects received a sheet containing the mark they had been given by the sophisticated group. The sheet itself was set up in the form of a grid with sophisticated group evaluator number 1, 2, and 3 across the top and the four criteria (objectivity, common sense, persuasive style, and attention to detail) down the side of the grid. Beside the grid was a small box labelled total score. Finally, below the grid the words Decision and Comments were typed in with space provided so that the decision-making panel could elaborate on their judgment.

For all conditions, the subject received a failing mark (between 6.0 and 6.9) and the words *Must remain in the unsophisticated group* were written in beside the word Decision. Whether or not the remainder of the grid was filled in or any comments were made, however, depended on whether the condition being tested was procedurally just or unjust. For the just procedure condition, the entire grid was filled out giving a complete breakdown of the subject's total score, but no comments were written. By contrast, for the unjust procedure condition the grid was left blank, but beside *comments* a statement was given indicating that the decision reached by the panel had been on the basis of one of the three unjust criteria (i.e., sex, length, or personality).

Subjects were given a few minutes to digest their negative feedback. They were then asked to consider four behavioral options for the remainder of the experiment. These four options were: (a) Accept option—The subject accepts the evaluation received and agrees to participate in the next part of the experiment as a member of the unsophisticated decision-making group; (b) Individual retest option—The subject is dissatisfied with the decision and requests a second attempt at answering questions; (c) Individual protest option—The subject is dissatisfied with the decision and requests the opportunity to send a personal message to the sophisticated group asking them to reconsider their decision about the subject's particular case; and (d) Collective action option—The subject is dissatisfied with the evaluation procedure and wishes to solicit the support of other members of the unsophisticated group in the form of a petition to be presented to the sophisticated group. The aim of this collective action is to induce the sophisticated group to change the evaluation procedure.

The subject was asked to rate the extent to which he or she wished to adopt each of the four options for the remainder of the experiment. The ratings were made on an 11-point scale ranging from not at all (0) to very much (10). For the individual protest option and the collective action option, subjects were required to compose the message or petition they wished to send if they gave a rating above the midpoint (5). This was done to ensure that subjects did not simply endorse all options indiscriminantly, because each en-

dorsement, besides the accept option, required additional work and presumably more commitment. Finally, subjects rated, on 11-point scales, their feelings about the decision they had received from the sophisticated group. The feelings included satisfied, hopeful, angry, angry in principle, and frustrated.

Results and Discussion

The ratings for the behavioral intention options were analyzed by means of a $2 \times 2 \times 4$ analysis of variance (ANOVA). The independent variables included distributive justice (just, unjust), procedural justice (just, unjust), and the repeated measure of behavioral intention (accept, individual retest, individual protest, collective action). The dependent variable was subject's ratings of the four behavioral intentions on an 11-point scale.

A significant two-way interaction involving distributive justice and behavioral intention emerged, F(2,72) = 7.64, p < .01, which was embedded in a three-way interaction, F(3,108) = 4.69, p < .01. The three-way interaction is presented in Figure 1.

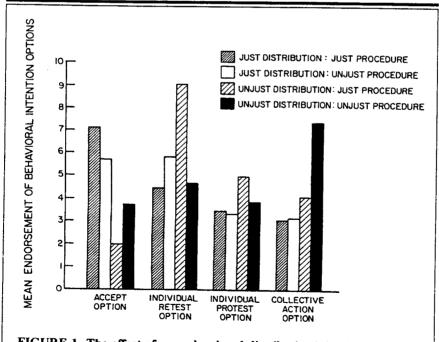


FIGURE 1. The effect of procedural and distributive injustice on behavioral intentions in the face of failure to gain entry to a higher status group.

The pattern of ratings provided partial support for the initial hypothesis, and indicated there are specific conditions associated with accepting ones situation, taking individual action, or engaging in collective action. It was hypothesized that collective action would be the response to procedural injustice, and that the preferred response for distributive injustice would be individualistic. From Figure 1 it is clear that the collective action option arose when both the distribution and procedure were unjust. The combined effects of the two forms of injustice did not simply generate more intended action generally. When both procedure and distribution were unjust, the students did not strongly endorse the individual options; not even the option that challenged the sophisticated group's decision. Rather, they specifically endorsed the option of collective action.

Procedural injustice did not evoke intentions of collective action when the distribution was just. It would seem that what affected the subjects personally and directly was pivotal. Thus, when the procedure was just but distribution was unjust, the reaction was also strong. In this case, however, the response was individualistic, not collective. Finally, as would be expected, when the subject failed, but the procedure and distribution were just, he or she accepted the situation with little or no protest. Acceptance under these conditions seems to have included a lack of motivation, because there was little enthusiasm to retake the test.

A series of 2×2 ANOVAs for the ratings on each of the five feelings produced no significant effects; however, an analysis for a total score based on the five feelings produced a significant main effect for distributive justice, F(1, 36) = 7.27, p < .05, and a two-way interaction, F(1, 36) = 4.44, p < .05. The interaction indicated that the most negative feelings arose when both the procedure and distribution were unjust (M = 31.5). When both procedure and distribution were just (M = 22.5), or when only the procedure (M = 23.9) or the distribution alone were unjust (M = 21.1), feelings were quite similar. Again it was the combined effects of procedural and distributive injustice that produced the most negative feelings and, in the analysis of behavioral intentions, evoked collective action.

In summary, the results of Experiment 1 indicate that it is possible to isolate conditions that discriminate collective action, individual action, and no action. That the conditions did not merely provoke more or less action regardless of type is socially significant. At the same time, the initial hypothesis that proposed differential action on the basis of type of injustice must be qualified. It would seem that a just or unjust procedure by itself is not sufficient, collective action requires that the unjust procedure also be associated with an unjust distribution that effects the actor personally.

The emergence of this finding raises conceptual questions about the specific manipulation of distributive and procedural justice used in this experiment. It is clear that failure to gain access to the advantaged group on the

basis of gender is procedurally unjust. But how did students interpret their failure despite a relatively good answer on the test, the manipulation of distributive justice? Although the failing grade may have been viewed as an unjust distribution of injustice, students may well have perceived this as a form of procedural injustice. Because of this ambiguity, further research is needed before the differential implications of distributive and procedural justice can be appreciated. Nevertheless, subjects in the present experiment did have clear preferences for different courses of action, depending upon the justice manipulations.

Experiment 2

The experimental paradigm concerning the effects of procedural and distributive injustice was also used to study that of justice and closeness to successful entry into a high status group. The central hypothesis was that collective action would be advocated by those who were close to gaining entry into a high status group but were refused entry for what was perceived to be unjust reasons. It was further hypothesized that individualistic action would be the preferred action for those who were close but unsuccessful on legitimate grounds. Finally, it was expected that those who were far from gaining entrance on a legitimate basis would be prone to passively accept their situation.

Method

Subjects and procedure. A separate sample of 40 male and female student volunteers from departments other than psychology participated in the experiment. As with Experiment 1, subjects began as members of the unsophisticated decision-making group and took a test of their decision-making skills in an attempt to gain entry into the sophisticated group. The manipulations of closeness to entry and justice were achieved in the form of feedback given to the subject by the panel of three sophisticated decision makers.

Closeness of entry. This was manipulated by the scores subjects received for their answers to the test case. They were informed that a grade of 85% was required for entry into the sophisticated decision-making group and that the average grade for subjects on the test case had thus far been 60%. Those in the close condition received a grade of 82%, along with comments from the panel about how very close they had come to gaining entry. For the "far condition," subjects received a grade of 50%.

Justice. Those in the just condition were refused entry purely on the basis of an objective assessment of their performance on the test case. Those in the unjust condition received comments on their score sheet that indicated that their final mark had been reduced somewhat because of their gender.

After subjects had received the negative feedback, they were asked to rate their intentions for the remainder of the experiment. As in Experiment 1, the behavioral options were accept, individual retest, individual protest, and collective action. Also, subjects rated their feelings about the decision they had received.

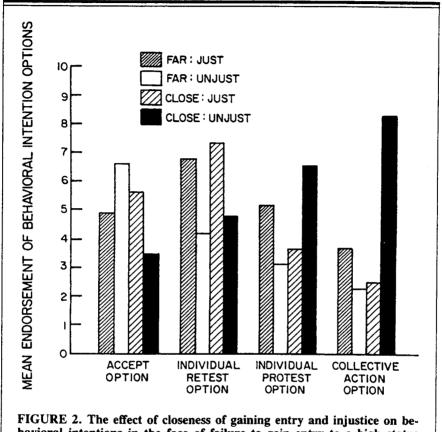
Results and Discussion

For the analysis of behavioral intention options, a $2 \times 2 \times 4$ ANOVA was performed. The independent variables included closeness of entry (close, far), justice (just, unjust), and the repeated measure of behavioral intention (accept, individual retest, individual protest, collective action). In addition to one main effect and one two-way interaction, the analysis yielded a significant three-way interaction, F(3, 108) = 6.31, p < .001, which is presented in Figure 2.

Confirmation was found for the major hypothesis of the study. Those in the close-unjust condition clearly preferred the collective action option over any of the other options. Also, subjects in the other three conditions did not endorse the collective action option. For those whose evaluation was just, whether they were close or far from gaining entry, the preferred option was individualistic, specifically a request to retake the test.

Finally, for those who were far from gaining entry and in the unjust condition, the attitude seemed to be one of defeat. They opted for the accept option and showed little or no interest in any of the individual or collective action options. This finding is contrary to expectation. It was believed that the accept option would be endorsed by those in the far but just condition. Instead, these subjects showed some optimism by endorsing the individual retake option. Those in the far-unjust condition did not respond to the injustice they faced. Two factors may have combined to induce subjects in this condition to accept their fate. First, their very low score might have taken away any hopes of the situation being altered. Second, they may not have believed that association with the advantaged group was particularly desirable. After all, this initially desirable group treated others unjustly, thereby making them possibly less desirable in the end. The combined effort would be for these subjects to have little motivation for taking action designed to gain access to the advantaged group.

Subjects' feelings were analyzed by means of a 2×2 ANOVA for a total score based on the five feelings. The analysis yielded a significant two-way interaction that was consistent with the analysis of behavioral intentions, F(1, 36) = 6.03, p < .01. By far the most negative feelings (M = 32.4) arose among subjects in the unjust condition who were close to gaining entry to the sophisticated group. Those in the close but just condition were far less negative (M = 22.8). Those in the far but just condition were not the ones



havioral intentions in the face of failure to gain entry to a high status group.

who were least angry (M = 25.0) as was predicted. Rather, it was those in the far and unjust condition who expressed the least negative emotions (M = 21.6).

General Discussion

The two experiments were designed as an initial attempt to delineate the conditions in which individuals are prone to take no action, individual action, or collective action in the face of perceived injustice. The present results indicate that it is possible to specify conditions that discriminate among the three categories of response, although the specific conditions were not exactly those specified by the hypotheses.

The findings suggest that collective action is not always the preferred

response to procedural injustice. It would seem that only when procedural injustice is coupled with distributive injustice that affects the individual directly will collective action be the preferred response. As predicted, collective action also arises when an individual is close to gaining entry to a high status group but is refused on what are perceived to be unjust grounds. Contrary to the hypothesis, however, those who were justly treated and far from gaining entry did not endorse the no action option to the extent expected. Those who were treated unjustly and far from gaining entry were most prone to accept their membership in a low status group. Examples from the real world that might be relevant here are ethnic groups who have experienced severe discrimination and are clearly disadvantaged on economic and social bases, but who tend to accept their membership in a low status group. Perhaps, like the present subjects, the injustice robs them of personal control over this situation.

The paradigm used for the present experiments seems promising as a laboratory analogue to the "meritocracy" ideology of western democracy. An important feature of the paradigm is that the exit option was available to members of the disadvantaged group. One possible response offered to individuals in the face of inequality was to try to leave the disadvantaged group. Although the exit option has been incorporated in Social Identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) in the form of individual social mobility, we know of no previous attempts to experimentally test the conditions under which this option would be preferred by disadvantaged group members. An important improvement on the paradigm for future research would be a second phase to the experiment that would not only allow subjects to indicate their intentions for various behavioral options but also present them with an opportunity to carry through on their intentions.

The "meritocracy" ideology of western democracies explicitly places greater emphasis upon individualistic rather than collective responses to social and material inequalities. This ideological leaning seems to be reflected by the bias inherent in such influential theories as equity and, to a lesser extent, relative deprivation. Although these theories ascribe considerable importance to the concepts of distributive justice and procedural justice, they focus mainly on individualistic responses to perceived injustice and almost totally neglect potential collective responses. The widespread and important collective responses to perceived inequality that have been instigated by minority groups in the 1980s demand theoretical explanations that also account for collective responses. The present experiments represent an initial step to clarify the conditions in which collective respones to perceived inequality will be preferred over those that are individualistic. As such, they can be seen as part of a movement to counter "reductionist" models of intergroup relations, and to place greater emphasis upon collective action (Billig, 1976; Taylor & Moghaddam, 1987).

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