

Turning the tables on justice: Status and power as predictors of fairness towards others

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For the past 25 years, the dominant paradigm of psychological research on justice has examined the reactions of those in a relatively lower hierarchical position (e.g., subordinates, citizens, etc.) to the (un)fairness they experience in their encounters with those who are relatively higher in the hierarchy (e.g., leaders, managers and other types of group authorities, etc.). This approach has confirmed the critical importance of justice in organizational contexts, and has generated a great deal of insight about fairness dynamics (i.e., reactions and concerns that relate to fairness) among parties of relatively lower hierarchical position. Yet the traditional focus on parties of relatively lower hierarchical rank neglects half of the fairness equation, as it fails to consider fairness dynamics among the higher-ranked parties to the encounter. This omission represents a significant shortcoming for justice research. In particular, by only focusing on fairness dynamics among lower ranked parties, justice research has failed to examine the factors that shape whether those higher in hierarchical rank treat their lower ranked counterparts fairly or unfairly. In other words, by neglecting to focus on fairness dynamics of higher ranked parties, justice research has yet to consider the psychology of justice among the very parties who are responsible for creating justice in the first place.

In my talk, I will present research that explores two factors that are central to understanding those of relatively higher rank, namely their sense of how much status and power they possess. This research explores the influence of status and power on the (un)fairness of outcomes, decision making, and treatment extended to others. More specifically, the studies I will present test the prediction that status and power exert differential effects on fairness, with status exerting a positive influence on fairness and power (by and large) exerting a negative effect.

This work provides a more comprehensive understanding of justice in groups and organizations by focusing on the individuals who are actually charged with creating justice. On a more general level, this research also contributes to the literatures on status and power, demonstrating important differences between these constructs and providing insight regarding the distinct psychological mechanisms associated with status and power. Time permitting, I will discuss other lines of research on the psychology of justice among higher-ranked parties, as well as other approaches to distinguishing status and power.