

Combining Moral Orientation and Justice Theory: Fairness Lessons for the Decision Maker

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Drawing from justice and moral orientation literature, this paper examines the role that one's sex¹ plays within the decision appraisal process in shaping individual fairness perceptions. We propose that males and females use a different "viewing lens" when scrutinizing decisions made by others; accordingly, interactional justice is of primary importance for woman while procedural justice is of principal importance to men. We conclude with a discussion on how decision makers, by understanding this process, can increase the acceptance of their decisions.

Introduction

Decision makers are called upon to make judgments that determine future organizational directions. Likely, these judgements will have significant consequences for the organization, for organizational stakeholders, as well as for themselves. Researchers have shown considerable interest in decision making and have primarily focussed their investigation on how one can make an effective decision (Bass, 1985; Janis, 1991; March, 1994). Recently, research has also focussed on how those affected by the decision (e.g. subordinates) come to first judge and then react to decisions made by others.

One finding of this line of research has been that individuals examine decisions made by others to determine if they were made in a 'fair' or 'just' manner. In brief, this research finds that the perceived fairness of a decision plays a significant role in determining how a decision is received. The research suggests that decisions that are perceived to be fair are more readily accepted and result in increased employee loyalty (Lind and Tyler, 1988), more positive evaluations of leaders (Tyler, Rasinski, and Spodick, 1985), increased job satisfaction (Konovsky and Cropanzano, 1991; McFarlin and Sweeney, 1992), and greater organizational commitment (Schappe, 1996). Conversely, judgements that are seen to be unfair result in decreased organizational trust (Brockner, Weisenfeld, and Martin, 1995) and decreased productivity and employee commitment (Brockner, Grover, and Blonder, 1988). This research suggests that the successful implementation of a decision is directly linked to its perceived fairness.

A number of factors have been found to effect this "decision made by others – fairness perception" process that moderates how decisions are perceived. These factors include: previous level of organizational commitment (Brockner, Tyler, and Cooper-Schneider, 1992), how the decision is presented or framed (Brockner, Wiesenfeld, and Martin, 1995), the outcome of the decision, such as whether the individual receives a reward (Greenberg, 1987), individual differences such as equity sensitivity (King, Miles, and Day, 1993), and, of paramount importance for this research, a person's sex (Dawson, 1997).

In this paper we examine the role that sex differences play in forming fairness perceptions. We believe that this is an important question to consider because, although sex is one of the most

¹ The words sex and gender have often been used interchangeably. In this paper sex will be used to refer to a person's biological maleness or femaleness, while gender will refer to the nonphysical aspects of being masculine or feminine.

frequently cited variables in management research (Lips, 1993), only a few studies have investigated its role in fairness belief formations (e.g. Dawson, 1997). Secondly, this question is meaningful to study because of the changing demographics of the workforce; more woman are now employed in the workplace. This change has led to a heightened sensitivity to the issues of diversity and an increased focus on understanding differences in individual perceptions. Finally, although the male-female divergent view is not without controversy, we believe that in light of recent research this distinction is still useful for theory development (Dawson, 1997; Lips, 1993).

In short, it is the goal of this paper to examine the role that sex plays in shaping an individual's fairness perceptions within the decision appraisal process. We propose that a person's sex acts as a 'viewing lens' from which an individual judges decisions made by others. Based on Carol Gilligan's foundational work, we will discuss how different "overlapping consensus beliefs" (Daniels, 1996) are formed for men and women resulting in two different perspectives of fairness. Next, we will provide a brief overview of organizational justice theory and present a series of propositions of how sex and justice interact to tell an informed story. Finally, we will briefly discuss the managerial implications of these propositions. We wish to state that it is not our intention to develop a conversation that homogenizes fairness development between the sexes. Rather, our goal is to foster an understanding of the judgement process in order that decision makers might better value diverse perspectives and, ultimately, make better managerial decisions.

Understanding Fairness Differences

In this section we will first investigate the concept of a shared understanding of fairness. We will then be able to discuss the role that socialization of the sexes plays in shaping fairness beliefs. Walzer (1983) argues that fair beliefs depend on the "shared meanings" that individuals in cultures develop for different types of actions. Individuals develop a collective sense of what is right and wrong through their interactions with others of their group. As a result, Walzer maintains that within "distinct" groups we should expect considerable similarity in fairness judgements. Conversely, Rawls (1993) argues that there are forces that make pluralism about moral (or fairness) views a persistent fact in modern cultures. Rawls states that, under conditions of freedom, individuals are likely to arrive at very different "comprehensive" views about specific outcomes or issues with the depth of these variations depending primarily on the complexity of these issues. There is an obvious tension between these two views. For Walzer there is a consistent set of rules that cultural groups hold, while for Rawls these rules are individually developed and individually held. Given these divergent viewpoints, how do individuals form an understanding about what is "just" or "unjust" and, hence, fair terms for cooperating with others? Daniels (1996) proposes that the answer involves developing an "overlapping consensus" of fairness beliefs in which convergence occurs when groups of individuals use similar reasoning. Overlapping consensus beliefs imply that the conception of fairness has achieved a state of "public reason" where a set of judgements, based upon a set of principles, is consistently held. Daniels (1996) argues that personal identity, such as an individual's sex, serves to produce a "narrow reflective equilibrium" in which members of a specific group possess a similar logic or understanding. With consensus and consistency in a group comes greater trust among and between group members.

We proposed (as others previously have – e.g. Gilligan, 1982) within the workforce today there are two distinct groups who hold different overlapping consensus beliefs – namely women and men. Gilligan (1982) questioned whether there was a difference between how women and men understand what is morally right or wrong and thus what is fair or unfair. She argued that an individual's sex makes a difference in how the individual views the world because the problems

and challenges faced by women are different than those faced by men. Gilligan reasons that men and women are different because society expects different things from women compared to men; by virtue of different socialization, women and men hold different values and ethical views. According to Eagly (1987) women are typically socialized to show a concern for others, to be selfless, and to exhibit a desire to be a part of a community; men are typically socialized to focus on self-mastery, individual competence, and self-assertion.

By empirically exploring this issue through in-depth interviews held with males and females, Gilligan (1982) found there was a contrast between the decision criteria that men and women applied when making judgements. In general, women see themselves as belonging to a social network where responsibility and attention to the needs of others is important. Men, conversely, see themselves as individuals who interact with others within the confines of a set of rules where attention to rights of others and fairness is important.

To expand, Gilligan and her colleagues (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan and Attanucci, 1988) found that men hold primarily a “justice” or “rights” perspective which focuses on problems of inequality and oppression. As a result, men hold up fairness, equal respect and equitable rewards as an ideal. Gilligan contends that men examine a situation (for our discussion a decision) and compare it against a set of justice rules - consisting primarily of impartiality, impersonality, and rationality - to determine if the action can be judged as being fair. This justice characterisation depicts men as being fundamentally concerned with the rights of individuals and any action perceived as interfering with these rights is seen as wrong. Gilligan argues that men have a general understanding that there are rules that one must play within; anything done outside the rules is ‘not cricket’ and is perceived as being unfair.

In contrast, Gilligan found that women view themselves as part of a network of relationships and feel that sustaining these relationships is of primary importance. Consequently, women primarily hold a “care” or responsibility perspective which relate to problems of detachment and or abandonment. Gilligan affirms that women hold guardianship and responsiveness to need as an ideal and that they focus on whether an action helps or harms others. For women, judgements are perceived to be fair if they stress the need to maintain one’s relationships and to be sensitive to the needs of others. In other words, “fair judgements avoid giving hurt” (Lips, 1993). Collectively, these findings countered Kohlberg’s theory that there is a universal moral judgement about what is fair (Kohlberg, 1984); Gilligan’s theory replaced it with the conception that women use “a different voice” from men to pronounce what is fair (Gilligan, 1982).

Gilligan points out that the two perspectives are not an antithesis of each other. She states that

“It is important to stress that these two approaches are not opposites or mirror images of one another (with justice uncaring and care unjust). Instead they constitute different ways of organizing the problem which lead to different reasoning strategies, different ways of thinking about what is happening and what to do”. (Gilligan, 1988; p.xxi).

To Gilligan, neither the male “rights” approach nor the female “care” orientation represents a superior type of reasoning. Rather, she prefers to state that they are just “different” and in some sense complementary of each other. As well, although her theory states that men tend to place more emphasis on rights while women place more attention on care, both the rights and care orientation can be found in the reasoning of women and men. To explain how two separate perspectives can exist in parallel, Gilligan uses the analogy of a visual phenomenon. For

example, in a well-known drawing, one viewer may see a vase while another sees two faces in profile. Eventually, it is possible to see both the vase and faces, but in general, one view will remain more compelling. Similarly, people will make judgements about decisions based on either a care or justice perspective, even if they are aware of both possibilities.

Justice Theory

In this section we will first discuss justice theory and then link it with moral reasoning theory to show how, when combined, a more informed understanding of decision making emerges. Research into justice theory has resulted in considerable insight into the ‘beliefs’ that individuals use to guide judgements concerning the fairness of a decision. The underlying idea behind this reflective process is that individuals ‘test’ the decision made against a set of fairness beliefs that they hold in order to judge whether the action taken is perceived as being just. In relation to our discussion, justice theory involves individuals reacting to decisions made by others by evaluating both the “relative” and “absolute” fairness of those judgements. Relative fairness meaning that the decision taken by others is measured to see if it results in personal outcomes that are consistent with the outcomes that referent others receive – the focus is thus on the ‘ends’ achieved by the decision. An example of a conceptualization that relates to a relative fairness judgement is equity theory (Adams, 1965). In turn, absolute fairness means that the decision making process is judged to see if it adheres to some personally held ideal justice belief – with the focus on the ‘means’ used to achieve the decision. Procedural justice (Thibaut and Walker, 1975) and interactional justice (Bies and Moag, 1986) are examples of theories that examine absolute fairness.

As a relative fairness theory, equity theory posits that individuals examine their ratio of inputs to outcomes and compare them to the ratio of inputs to outcomes experienced by a relevant other. People evaluate whether they are putting in more effort in relations to their rewards than someone else with inequity being seen as unjust. Distributive justice, thus, encompasses individual perceptions of allocation decisions – with people effectively examining whether they received their fair share of outcome rewards. Equity theory has been applied to a variety of situations with research results that provide “generally quite strong” support for the construct (Greenberg, 1990, p.401).

Procedural justice is concerned with the perceived fairness of the methods or procedures used to make a decision (Thibaut and Walker, 1975). Research has found that individuals place importance on having input into the decision and ensuring that procedures are consistent, are undertaken without self-interest, are based on accurate information, and provide an opportunity to correct the situation (Leventhal, Karuza, and Fry, 1980). Like equity theory, procedural justice has also been shown to significantly affect employee behaviours and attitudes (Lind and Tyler, 1988, Greenberg, 1990).

More recently the construct of interactional justice, introduced by Bies and Moag (1986), has been examined in organisational settings. Interactional justice refers to the perceived fairness of the communication process used and the interpersonal treatment received either during the process of making a decision or as a result of the enactment of the decision. Individuals examine the decision to see if some people were treated differently than others or whether the decision maker adequately explained the decision. Even treatment and satisfactory levels of communication have been found to result in positive perceptions of management decisions (Shapiro, Buttner, and Barry, 1994).

Moral Orientation and Justice Combined

It is our belief that procedural and interactional justice theories can be combined with moral reasoning theory to provide a better understanding of how fairness beliefs develop. We posit that individuals, by using self- and externally-generated information, form a personal justice perspective from which they then interpret decisions. Furthermore, we propose that one's sex provides a strong discriminating "viewing lens" from which decisions are judged. For example, if a woman perceives that a decision is 'caring' she will accept the decision as being fair, regardless of whether the decision was seen as being 'just' or not. Conversely, a man will perceive a decision as being fair if it attends to a 'justice' perspective, irrespective of whether the decision was 'caring' or not.

Research by Schminke and Ambrose (1997), in a study that examined whether sex moderates an individual's perspective, supports our "viewing lens" concept. The authors found that the 'decision models' employed by men and women to respond to ethical dilemmas were significantly different. They discovered that women and men both reported a greater likelihood of following a "professional ethic" - i.e. "how would my action be judged by an impartial jury of my peers - as their most-likely decision model" (p.721). However, over half of the participants identified another model as their most-likely to use approach. The decision model with the biggest difference between woman and men occurred in "Kant's Categorical Imperative which asks whether our society could continue to function if everyone acted in this fashion" (p.721). Over 18% of the women in the study compared to only 3% of the men selected this alternative. This research shows that men and women use significantly different criteria or "viewing lens" to examine the fairness of a decision.

We will now provide a series of propositions which link moral orientation and justice theory.

Proposition 1: Women use primarily a "care" viewing lens when processing the fairness of a decision made by others. Consequently, they will place greater importance on the "interactional" justice aspects of a decision.

As stated earlier, interactional justice is concerned with the communication process used by the decision maker and the interpersonal treatment received by the person affected by the decision. As Carol Gilligan's work has shown, women place greater importance on "relationships" and "care." We argue that women examine a decision to see if it was communicated in a sensitive way, whether the decision maker adequately explained the decision, whether the decision favoured some over others, and/or whether it caused anyone harm when determining if the decision was fair. Hence, it is reasoned that interactional justice will be most meaningful. With careful and sensitive treatment plus adequate communication, we suggest that women will perceive a decision as being fairly made.

Recent research supports our proposition. Dawson (1997), in a study on men and women's ethical attitudes and decision making, found that relationships are more important to women than men. Using questionnaires that consisted of 20 different ethical misconducts, Dawson discovered that ethical differences between men and women are specific to the context of the situation at hand. When the scenario was relational in nature, women judged the scenario significantly differently from men. However, when the situation involved personal conscience and honesty and was not related to interactional justice, no significant differences were found. Although not a full test of our proposed model, this study supports our proposition in that it shows that men and women perceive actions by others that affect inter-personal relationships

differently. Since relationships are seen by women as being more important, we argue that adhering to interactional justice will also be important.

Proposition 2: Men utilise primarily a “justice” viewing lens when processing the fairness of a decision made by others. Consequently, they will place importance on the “procedural” justice aspects of a decision.

Based on Gilligan’s thesis that males hold rule following and the application of consistent standards as important, we propose that procedural justice will be the primary justice dimension that men use in judging the perceived fairness of a decision. As stated previously, procedural justice theories suggest that general “rules” are applied by individuals to measure whether a decision made by others was fair. Leventhal, Karuza, and Fry (1980) found that there are a number of key rules important for achieving high procedural justice (e.g. maintaining consistency in decision standards, constraining self-interest by the decision maker, soliciting and using others’ input prior to making the decision, the opportunity to challenge the decision). From this research it is clear that procedural justice focuses primarily on the ‘processes’ involved in making the decision. We argue that ‘rule’ respecting men will place primary importance on procedural justice.

In brief, men focus on the process involved in the decision making and examine it against procedural rules to determine if they were followed. Adhering to these rules helps to ensure that men perceive a decision as being fairly made.

Proposition 3: Women have been found to process more information and as a result will utilize more justice information than men to inform their decisions.

Although we concur with Gilligan that men and women attend primarily to different aspects of a message, recent research has found that there is another sex difference that is likely to influence decision judgements. Women, relative to men, have been found to engage in more detailed elaboration of message content (Meyers-Levy, 1989; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991).

Myers-Levy and Maheswaran (1991), in a study that explores sex differences in processing strategies, found that women’s processing often involves substantial, detailed elaboration while males tend to draw associations that are tied to relevant decision-making frameworks. According to the authors, males examine the content of a message to find an overall theme, searching for consistency by using a less effortful or schema based strategy. Conversely, females dig deeper into the message and examine all relevant information and search for inconsistency using an effortful or a detailed strategy. Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran conclude that because of this difference females will likely have increased sensitivity to the particulars of the message content.

Combining this research with our previous propositions, women will use an interactional justice perspective first, but will also examine the decision to see if adheres to other fairness aspects. Thus, women will use procedural justice as a secondary reference source when examining whether a decision was fair. We believe that this is an important point because, at an empirical level, it is possible to find research that both supports Gilligan’s theory (Gilligan and Attanucci, 1988; Stiller and Forrest, 1990) and research that refutes her conceptualisation (Lifton, 1985; Walker, 1984). In a review of the gender and moral development literature, Ford and Richardson (1994) found that in several studies females are likely to act differently than males while an equal number of studies found that sex had no impact on judgements or beliefs.

From this evidence it would appear that this debate has not achieved closure as neither side has provided a convincing argument to refute the other's theory. Perhaps, as Meyers-Levy and Maheswaren's (1991) research found, the reason that definitive support for Gilligan's model has not been found is because of this primary/secondary nature of women's' judgement pattern. What this finding suggests to us is that a hierarchical justice model exists for females, while males tend to use a schema-based approach. Women subscribe to an interactional perspective first, but then also attend to procedural aspects. Thus, depending upon how the research was framed (if, for example, only procedural issues were examined) it is possible to conclude that men and women react similarly. However, men will have used their primary viewing lens while women will have made use of their secondary viewing lens. Further research is obviously needed to fully understand seemingly contradictory research results.

Managerial Implications

In this paper we have posited that men and women examine different aspects of decisions to see if they are fair and just. We will now draw from our discussion to apply its lessons to the decision making process.

For decision makers, the most important point of this paper is that 'where we stand determines our view'. To overcome a myopic view based on our sex we must understand that our personal viewing lens provides us with a certain perspective. So, for example, male managers, when examining or making a decision, will likely attend to the details in the process that they feel are important, namely a procedural justice focus. Attention will be cast towards adhering to a set of procedural rules which focus on problems of inequality and injustice. This procedural justice decision making approach will likely appease those who share a similar outlook, primarily other men. However, it may alienate those who do not share this perspective, primarily women, especially if the decision affects people in a negative way. Conversely, women managers will likely use an interpersonal justice perspective and attend to care and communication aspects when making a decision. As a result, women may see this approach as being fair while men may take a more critical view.

An excellent example of a procedural justice decision-making process is the recent decision reached by the provincial and federal Ministers of Health. These individuals decided to compensate only a segment of Canadians infected by the Hepatitis C virus from blood supplied by the Canadian Red Cross. The tragedy has come to be known as Canada's tainted blood scandal. We argue that the decision, which compensated only those Canadians that contracted the Hepatitis C virus *after* 1986 resulted from a purely procedural justice focus on the problem. The Ministers based their decision to exclude those who contacted the virus before 1986 on the reasoning that, prior to 1986, there was no means to adequately test for the Hepatitis C virus. After 1986 a test was developed but the Canadian Red Cross decided not to use it. In the former case no rules were broken and hence no fault could be assigned. However, in the latter case an obvious (in retrospect) error occurred and fault could easily be placed. This focus on "equal rights" and "rules" is a perfect example of what is meant by a procedural based justice decision-making process.

The reaction from a segment of the general public was swift and overwhelmingly negative. The decision was attacked as being without compassion - people were equally hurt and the decision did not care for them equally. We posit that people who use a care-based interactional justice perspective had found the decision to be disgraceful. At the time of writing

the debate still rages on with increasingly persistent calls for equal compensation to all affected people.

We offer that decision makers need to understand their personal “blind spot” if they are to enact effective decisions. By being aware of their inherent orientation we believe decision makers can develop the capacities to attend to both a justice and care perspective and successfully apply them to their decision making process. Without attending to both a female care (interactional) and male justice (procedural) perspective, decision makers will likely gain support from only half the population while possibly alienating the rest.

Conclusion

It is not difficult to imagine a decision that, at some level, produces questions about whether the decision was fairly made. As a result, workplace justice has been the focus of much recent research (Brockner, Wiesenfeld, and Martin, 1995; Greenberg, 1990; Tyler, 1994). Adhering to a fairness perspective is important because decisions that are seen as fair receive greater support and are adhered to more than decisions that are found to be unjust.

In summary, men and women are likely to bring different strategies to bear in processing the fairness of decisions made by others. Unless these diverse perspectives are first recognized and then understood, disagreement and conflict between how these groups perceive decisions made will occur with individuals and organizations suffering as a consequence. We believe that by “linking together” moral orientation and justice theory the decision maker can now more easily apply the findings from one within the framework of the other. We offer that this will result in more widespread acceptance of the decisions that are made by “informed” decision makers.

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