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Exploring engagement in the university context: The role of justice and social identification

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Abstract

The study develops research on justice within the instructional context, examining the relationships between perceptions of justice and psychological engagement in the university setting. Two studies were run: 1) a pilot study aimed at validating the Group Engagement Model (Tyler & Blader, 2003) constructs within the university context and at constructing a questionnaire; 2) a study exploring the robustness of the hypotheses of the Group Engagement Model in the university setting. The results provide useful insights for the management of university level educational contexts to promote a better involvement of students in the attainment of high academic performance and institutional commitment.

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1. Introduction

Justice has received attention from scholars of various fields, most notably from political science and organizational behavior and has been the object of a large literature across the social sciences. Although issues of fairness have been extensively examined in many and different settings like work organizations, legal trials, conflict resolution processes, political arenas, they have not been widely studied within the instructional context (Tyler, 1987). Recently some investigations have been carried out drawing from theories of social and interpersonal fairness in examining social justice antecedents and reactions in the instructional setting (Tata, 1999; Chory-Assad, 2002; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004a; 2004b; Chory-Assad, 2007; Sabbagh *et al.*, 2006). The results of several studies carried out in schools and instructional settings in general showed the effects that justice perception can exert on several domains of the students' life. With regard to distributive justice, authors have shown that the distribution of educational goods is likely to affect students' learning motivations and well being (Feather, 1999; Dalbert & Maes, 2002) and to shape their "social maps" and world views regarding a just or unjust society (Dar, Erhard & Desh, 1998). Even more relevant is the perception of procedural justice. It affects motivation, rule compliance, trust toward teachers (Chory-Assad, 2007). These results are consistent with the mainstream of socio-psychological

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research on social justice, which highlighted connections between the perception of justice and attitudes toward institutional authorities, group cooperation, social identification (van den Bos & Lind, 2002).

2. The Group Engagement Model

Several models have been proposed to understand the psychological dynamics underlying justice. Integrating and expanding the insights of the earlier Group-value Model of Procedural Justice (Lind & Tyler, 1988) and the Relational Model of Authority (Tyler & Lind, 1992), Tyler and Blader (2003) with their Group Engagement Model offered an explanation for why procedural justice shapes cooperation in groups, organizations, and societies. The Group Engagement Model predicts that people's willingness to cooperate - especially discretionary cooperation - flows from the identity information they receive from the group. That identity information, in turn, is hypothesized to emanate from evaluations of the procedural fairness experienced in the group. The procedural fairness that influences people emanates from the formal rules of the group and from the implementation of these rules and procedures by particular authorities. These procedural elements are important because they shape people's identities. The "social identity mediation hypothesis" refers to the prediction that identity evaluations mediate the relationship between justice judgments and group engagement. Using survey data from employees of work organizations, Tyler and Blader tested several of the key hypotheses of the Group Engagement Model and found support for all of them.

3. The research

Are the proposal of Group Engagement Model applicable to the university setting and the student-teacher relationship? Drawing from the Group Engagement Model, the present study seeks to develop the research on justice within the instructional context, examining the relationships between perceptions of justice and psychological engagement in the university setting. Two studies were run: 1) a pilot study aimed at validating the Group Engagement Model constructs within the university context and at constructing a questionnaire; 2) a study exploring the robustness of the Group Engagement Model hypotheses in the university setting.

3.1 STUDY 1: *The pilot study*

The pilot study aimed at constructing and validating an instrument for the measurement of the Group Engagement Model constructs using exploratory factor analysis, and at establishing initial evidence for the psychometric qualities of the questionnaire. The operationalization of the dimensions of the model with particular reference to the university context was required, since scales used by Tyler and Blader were designed for work organizations.

3.1.1 *Participants*

Two hundreds and eighty Italian university students were recruited for the study. Participants were mainly female (80%) and mean age was 21.7 (SD=3.69).

3.1.2 *Instruments*

The questionnaire was comprised of:

1. a section on personal experience of Distributive Justice (e.g. "Teachers assign grades fairly to students");
2. a section on personal experience of Procedural Justice (e.g.: "The university body takes decisions fairly?" "My teachers respect my rights");
3. a section on Cooperation (e.g.: "I study with other students spontaneously");
4. a section on Identification (e.g.: "I feel emotionally connected with my university" "I like speaking well of my university with other people, outside the university environment" "My teachers respect my ideas");
5. a section on Internal Motivations including: 1) Attitudes (e.g.: "I do not want to move to another university"); 2) Values (e.g: "I respect university rules even when I think they are wrong");

6. a section on Instrumental Motivations (e.g.: “In my University, fees are too high for the services received”) and on Resources Received (e.g.: “My university gives me the chance to participate easily and cheaply in international exchange programs such as Erasmus program”).

3.1.3 Results

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using a principal axis factoring extraction with a direct oblimin rotation was performed on the whole set of 147 items. A four-factor solution, comprising 104 items, was found as the most parsimonious and statistically acceptable for the explanation of the data (23,15% of total variance explained). Sixty items were selected (15 items for each dimension). A second EFA was performed on the 60 items. Again, a four-factor solution was found, explaining 27,55% of total variance. Factor 1 “identification” (11,79% of total variance) is saturated by items concerning two of the three aspects of group-linked or social identity, which refers to the psychological engagements in university: identification and pride, and items which refer to a motivation to be loyal to the group. Factor 2 “rule-following behaviour” (6,24% of total variance) refers to a class of cooperative behaviour: mandatory behaviours and feelings of responsibility and obligation to follow group rules as well as views about the legitimacy of authorities. The items loading on Factor 3 “extra-role behaviours” (5,5% of total variance) express commitment and cooperation and they relate to discretionary-voluntary behaviours aiming at improving the university setting and at collaborating with other students. Items loading on Factor 4 “sense of justice” (4,02% of total variance) refer to principles of distributive justice, quality of interpersonal treatment and of decision-making processes.

In particular, results show that 1) psychological engagement with the university includes two aspects of the Group Engagement Model: identification with the group and pride (Tyler & Blader, 2003), together with a motivation to be loyal with the group; 2) behavioural engagement with the university refers to two different constructs such as mandatory behaviours and discretionary-voluntary behaviours, in line with the theoretical speculations and empirical evidences collected by Tyler and Blader; 3) sense of justice includes both distributive and procedural justice. In this way, justice emerges as an unitary construct.

3.2 STUDY 2

Study 2 aimed at exploring the robustness of the GEM hypotheses in the university setting.

According Tyler and Blader, procedural justice judgments are key antecedents of identity assessment. Identity assessment, in turn, is the key determinant of psychological and behavioural connection to the group. The central reason for people to engage in groups is that group help them to create and maintain their identities. Distributive judgments indirectly influence the group engagement by shaping identity. Moreover, research showed a relation between perception of justice and attitudes towards institutional authorities (van den Boos & Lind, 2002).

3.2.1 Participants

A total of 429 students from University “G. d’Annunzio”, Chieti-Pescara (Italy), from different faculties, participated in this study. Participants’ mean age was 22.11 (range: 18-50; $SD = 1.78$). Out of 74.1% were girls.

3.2.2 Instruments

The questionnaire comprised:

- 1) 15 items on identification;
- 2) 15 items on rule-following behaviours;
- 3) 15 items on extra-role behaviours;
- 4) 15 items on sense of justice.

3.2.3 Results

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using a principal axis factoring extraction with a direct oblimin rotation confirmed the presence of a four-factor solution.

Based on the dimensions emerged from the factor analysis, four indexes were computed and inter-items analyses were performed. Cronbach’s α ranged from .80 (for Rule-following behaviours) to .88 (for identification).

Correlations (Pearson's coefficient r) between the four dimensions were checked. Results showed significant relations between the four dimensions, with the exception of sense of justice and extra-role behaviours dimensions. As Identification and sense of justice are strongly correlated ($r=.402$; $p<.01$); the more students identify with the university, the more they feel being treated fairly. Sense of justice is specifically related with in-role behaviour ($r = .116$, $p<.05$); the more students perceive being treated fairly, the more they are respectful of university rules and authorities. The perceptions of justice are not related to the willingness to cooperate. University identification is related with extra-role behaviours ($r = .249$, $p<.01$). In other words, the more students identify with their University, the more they cooperate with other students.

Regression analyses show that perception of justice predicted the identification with the university ($\beta = .40$, $p<.0001$). Firstly, multiple-regression analyses with justice and identification simultaneously entered as explanatory variables and extra-role behaviours as the dependent variable, showed that identification (but not justice) significantly predicted extra-role behaviours. Secondly, when rule-following behaviours was entered as the dependent variable, results showed that justice (but not extra-role behaviours) significantly predicted rule following behaviours (see tab. 1).

Table 1 Multiple regression analyses with Extra-role behaviours and Rule-following behaviours as dependent variables

	Extra-role behaviours				Rule-following behaviours			
	B	β	t	p	B	β	t	p
Sense Justice	-,041	-,035	-,69	,491	,081	,114	2,169	,031
Identification	,264	,264	5,148	,000	,003	,005	,096	,932

Note. With Extra-role behaviours as dependent variable, $F(2,426)=14,39$, $p<.0001$, $R^2=.063$. With Rule-following behaviours as the dependent variable, $F(2,426)=2,91$, $p<.01$, $R^2=.013$.

The mediating role of identification between procedural justice and extra-role cooperation, postulated by Tyler and Blader is not observed in our regression analyses, because of a zero main effect of sense of justice on cooperation. We explored the idea that the effect of justice on cooperation depends on the level of identification. In other words we suggest that identification would be a moderator variable. That is, while students' identification is positively related to his or her cooperation, sense of justice has a relation with cooperation only in case of high identified students. In order to analyse the effect of the independent variable of justice in tandem with the moderator variable of identification on cooperation, we used a multiple regression analysis for interaction between two continuous variables (Aiken & West, 1991).

Using the enter method, a significant model emerged ($F(3, 425)=12,4$; $p<.001$; Adjusted R Square=.074). It appears that there is a positive effect of identification on cooperation and the justice identification interaction is significant, showing the moderating role of identification between sense of justice and cooperation. At increasing of identification, sense of justice have an increased effect on cooperation: in students highly identified with university, sense of justice is an important precursor of extra-role cooperation. On the other hand, in low identified students sense of justice has not the same effect on cooperation.

4. Conclusions

These results are in line with Smith, Tyler and Huo (2001), who show that group identification moderates the importance of relational treatment on cooperation. The authors describe how people care more strongly treatment quality by group authorities when the authority represents an important part of self. So, members who identify closely with the group will support collective improvements even at the expense of their interests, while individuals who do not identify with the group will focus on personal risks and benefits at short-time. Thus, identification shapes our attention to justice

These results provide useful insights for the management of university level educational contexts towards a better involvement of students in the attainment of academic performances and institutional commitment.

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