Encyclopedia of Social Psychology

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Distributive Justice

Definition

Distributive justice refers to the perceived fairness of one's outcomes. When a reward is allocated or a decision is made, people often make a judgment whether or not the outcome was fair. This judgment is referred to as a *distributive justice judgment* because it has traditionally been an assessment of how resources are distributed, or allocated, to individuals. Scholars have sought to understand both how these judgments are made and, once formed, what the consequences of such judgments are. Distributive justice has received considerable interest in a variety of different academic disciplines including psychology, philosophy, business, and law.

Theoretical History and Background

The notion of justice is a topic that has interested scholars, philosophers, and psychologists for a long time. Great thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates were some of the first to ponder this question of justice. Within the social sciences, the past halfcentury has witnessed considerable attempts to better understand justice. While philosophers speak of justice as an objective truth about what is fair, scholars in the social sciences seek to understand what individuals *perceive* to be fair. Thus, when psychologists speak of distributive justice, they are concerned with what individuals perceive to be fair as opposed to a logic-based, philosophical argument for whether something is indeed fair or not.

The initial study of distributive justice within psychology began in the late 1940s. The pioneering research involved studying members of the U.S. army during World War II. In examining survey data collected from the troops, an interesting finding emerged. Soldiers' attitudes were influenced more not by objective outcomes received but rather by the relative level of their outcomes compared to others in their unit. Indeed, members of Air Corps had less favorable perceptions about promotion opportunities compared to other units' members despite the fact that they had a much higher chance of being promoted than did members of those other units. After examining the results more closely, it became clear that Air Corps individuals compared themselves to other members of their unit as opposed to individuals in other units with lower promotion rates. Thus, *relative deprivation theory* was born, the notion that outcomes are not satisfying or unsatisfying in and of themselves but rather the comparison of one's own outcomes to others' outcomes is what matters most.

In the early 1960s, some scholars moved forward with the importance of comparing one's own treatment to that of others' treatment in determining whether outcomes are distributed fairly. A perspective emerged that suggested that, over time, individuals develop expectations in their relationships with others. These expectations are based on the idea that an individual's costs should be proportional to their rewards. People are keenly aware of whether they are putting more into a relationship then they are getting out of it. When individuals feel as if they put more into an exchange relationship than they get out of it, they tend to have negative reactions. A key point is that not all people will perceived distributive (in)justice the same way, because people have different *referents* (other people individuals compare themselves to) for determining whether there is an imbalance in the relationship.

Building on this idea of expectations in exchange relationships, other scholars further delineated between types of exchanges. For example, an exchange can be *economic*, whereby a tangible item of interest is exchanged, like an employee who works for a salary; or an exchange can be *social*, such that it is more subjective, like how one should repay a friend that does one a favor. Thus, this perspective suggests that distributive (in)justice can occur whether economic or social exchanges are violated in some way. And, in addition to looking to other people and other relationships to determine if an injustice occurred, one is likely to consider societal norms with regard to how people should be treated. For example, there is a norm that if you help someone in need, they should reciprocate in some way by acknowledging your help and helping you when you are in need.

In the mid-1960s, the most detailed theory developed to explain how people determine whether the outcomes they receive are fair was introduced. Referred to as *equity theory*, this theory builds on much of the prior work

on relative deprivation and expectations in exchange relationships. Specifically, equity theory posits that individuals in exchange relationships develop a ratio in their head of their perceived outcomes to their perceived inputs. They then compare that ratio to their perceptions of someone else's ratio or to the ratio they have experienced in similar situations in the past. When an individual's output-to-input ratio is lower than that of a referent, he or she is likely to perceive distributive injustice. Importantly, this theory goes on to explain what people tend to do when they feel their ratio is less than it should be, given their comparison base. Generally, people in "inequitable" situations will try to restore balance in one of three ways: by (1) altering one's own outputs or inputs, (2) altering a referent's outputs or inputs, or (3) removing oneself from the relationship.

In the 1970s, some scholars began to critique prior work on distributive justice. One of the primary concerns was that by describing distributive justice and equity synonymously, it did not allow for any other means to determine whether an outcome was fair. Scholars questioned whether weighing output–input ratios was the only way people could determine distributive (in)justice. A result of this inquiry was the identification of other principles, or rules, used to govern distributive justice. Indeed, some individuals are guided more by a principle of *equality*, the notion that regardless of one's input, everyone should receive the same outcomes. For example, if individuals are on a team, they should be given equal credit for success as opposed to just praising the most productive members. In addition, some individuals adhere to the principle of *needs*, the notion that regardless of input, those in need should get more favorable outcomes.

For example, our taxation system in the United States is designed such that wealthier individuals pay more and poorer individuals are supposed to reap more of the benefits of social services. Other principles were introduced over the years, but the principles of equity, equality, and needs have remained. Thus, this perspective on distributive justice highlights other principles people use to determine whether an outcome is fair.

To summarize, the initial work on distributive justice began over a half-century ago. The preliminary work focused on relative deprivation, or comparing one's own outcomes to the outcomes of a referent other. The next set of work concerned economic and social exchanges in relationships and expectations for outcomes one should receive. The most comprehensive and well-known theory about distributive justice, equity theory, was introduced in the 1960s and provided a specific formula for determining distributive justice based on an output–input ratio and highlighted what people do if they perceive inequity. Finally, in the 1970s, the notion was introduced that in addition to equity, other principles are often used by people to determine distributive justice, such as equality (providing the same outcomes to everyone) and needs (providing more favorable outcomes to those that are most in need).

Today, the study of distributive justice is alive and well. In general, interest has shifted more toward the procedures used to determine one's outcomes (referred to as *procedural justice*) and the fairness of interpersonal treatment (referred to as *interactional justice*). Despite this shift in interest, many scholars continue to study distributive justice. And, while equity is still the dominant paradigm for examining distributive justice, most scholars acknowledge that other principles such as equality and needs are also useful ways to understand distributive justice.

Research Findings

In addition to all of the theoretical work that has sought to explain what distributive justice entails and how people form perceptions of distributive (in)justice, there also has been a considerable amount of research on how people react once they have formed distributive justice judgments. For example, when individuals have favorable distributive justice perceptions, they are also likely to have more positive emotions and more favorable attitudes and behaviors directed toward the individual or organization that has provided the outcomes. Specifically, outcomes of distributive justice include the following: improved affect, satisfaction, commitment, evaluations of others, trust, willingness to help others, and performance. Thus, this large body of research demonstrates that perceptions of distributive justice are associated with a variety of important outcomes.

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Further Readings

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