

The Effect of Legal Training on Judgments of Rule of Law Violations

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Abstract

A sample of law students was presented with a scenario that described a teacher who contemplates violating a school's blind-grading rule. We manipulated the mandatory/discretionary nature of the rule, whether there was a good or bad reason for the violation, and whether the teacher ultimately violated the rule. We found that law students are much more fixated on the technical aspects of rules than were laypeople or lawyers from an earlier sample. However, like the lawyers and laypeople, law students forgave rule violations when there was a good reason for it, despite professing the superiority of rules to outcomes.

Introduction

Procedural justice research typically stresses the importance of procedural factors in individuals' satisfaction with their interactions with authorities; however, there are numerous situations in which individuals' concerns for the outcome of a decision will outweigh procedural concerns.

For example, in a series of earlier studies, we presented samples of undergraduate students, practicing lawyers, and general population laypeople with a scenario in which a teacher had violated his school's blind grading rule. In judging the teacher's actions, our participants focused nearly exclusively on the outcome of the violation (good or bad), rather than the extent of the procedural violation.

This research builds on these earlier studies to address the following questions:

- How do law students respond to situations in which procedural justice conflicts with outcome fairness?
- Do law students' judgments change as they progress through law school?

Methodology

Participants: Sample of 274 law students from Arizona State University (126 first-year; 87 second-year; 60 third year); 55% of participants were male, 45% were female; mean age = 27 years.

Materials: Our participants were presented with a written scenario in which a high school teacher is considering violating his school's blind grading rule.

Manipulations:

- Strength of the rule: mandatory vs. discretionary
- Purpose of the violation: good (fix an error) vs. bad (arbitrary change)
- Action of the protagonist: obey rule vs. violate rule

Methodology (continued)

Dependent Measures: In addition to a variety of general demographic and attitude questions, we measured our participants' judgments of protagonist's violation / adherence: Series of four items designed to measure the perceived appropriateness of the protagonist's actions

1. *In your opinion, how appropriate were the teacher's actions?*
2. *If you were on the school board, how likely would you be to vote to punish the teacher for misconduct?*
3. *Were the teacher's actions correct?*
4. *Did the teacher do the right thing?*

Items were entered into a principal axis factor analysis. A single factor emerged, explaining 69% of the total variance; $\alpha = .88$. Items were combined into a single measure of "appropriateness."

Results

General Attitudes

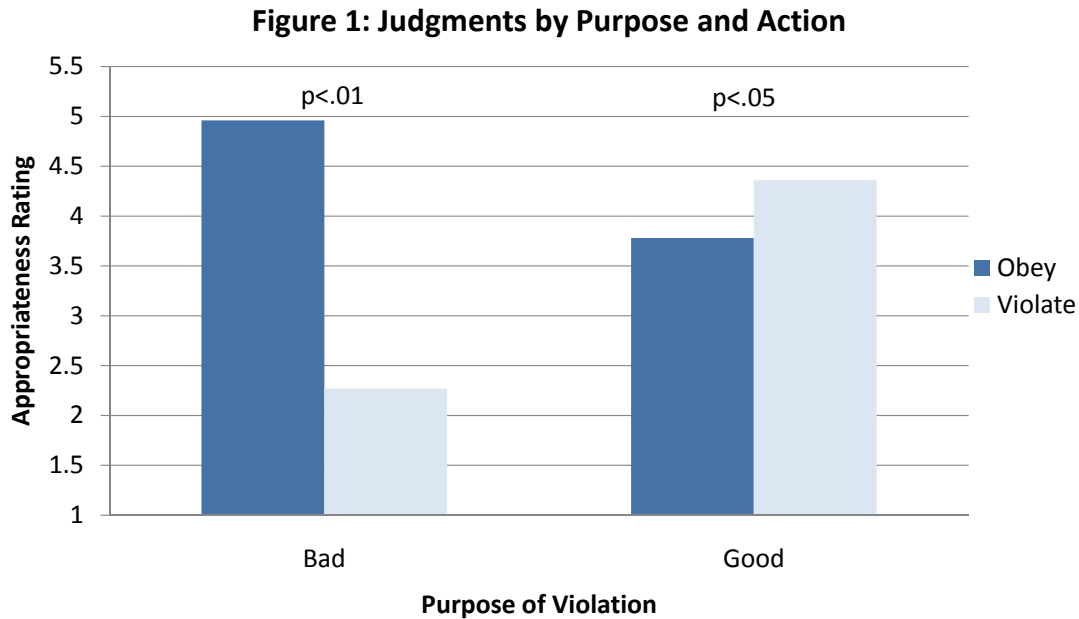
Consistent with our other samples, when asked outright about the importance of consistently following rules, our participants responded well above the scale midpoint: $M=5.60$; $t(272)=22.58$, $p<.001$.

Likewise, when asked about the importance of consistently ensuring that one's actions produce only good outcomes regardless of the rules, our participants also responded above the midpoint: $M=4.62$, $t(269)=6.92$, $p<.001$.

Participants rated rule adherence as more important than outcome fairness, $t(269)=8.71$, $p<.001$.

Judgments of the teacher's actions

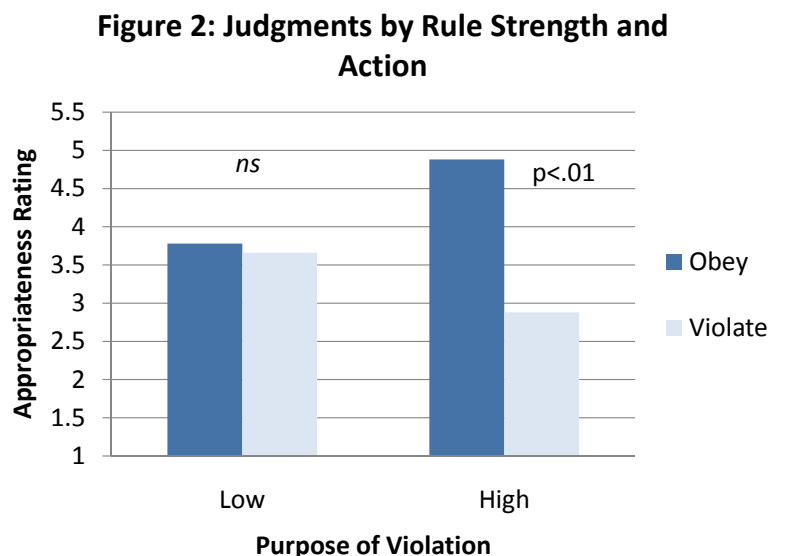
We conducted a 2 (Rule Strength) \times 2 (Action) \times 2 (Purpose) between-subjects analysis of variance on the composite measure of appropriateness. We found main effects for the Purpose and Action factors, but they were overshadowed by two more powerful interactions, the first of which is illustrated in Figure 1.



A Purpose x Action interaction was found, $F(1,261)=98.36, p<.001, \eta^2=.27$. When there was a bad purpose for violating the rule, the participants' preferred course of action was for the teacher to follow the rule; however, when there was a good purpose for the violation, the preferred course of action was to violate the rule. In both cases, the preferred action corresponds to a good outcome, and the data pattern suggests the participants were concerned with outcome fairness over procedural adherence.

We also found an Action x Rule Strength interaction, $F(1,261)=28.31, p<.01$; see Figure 2.

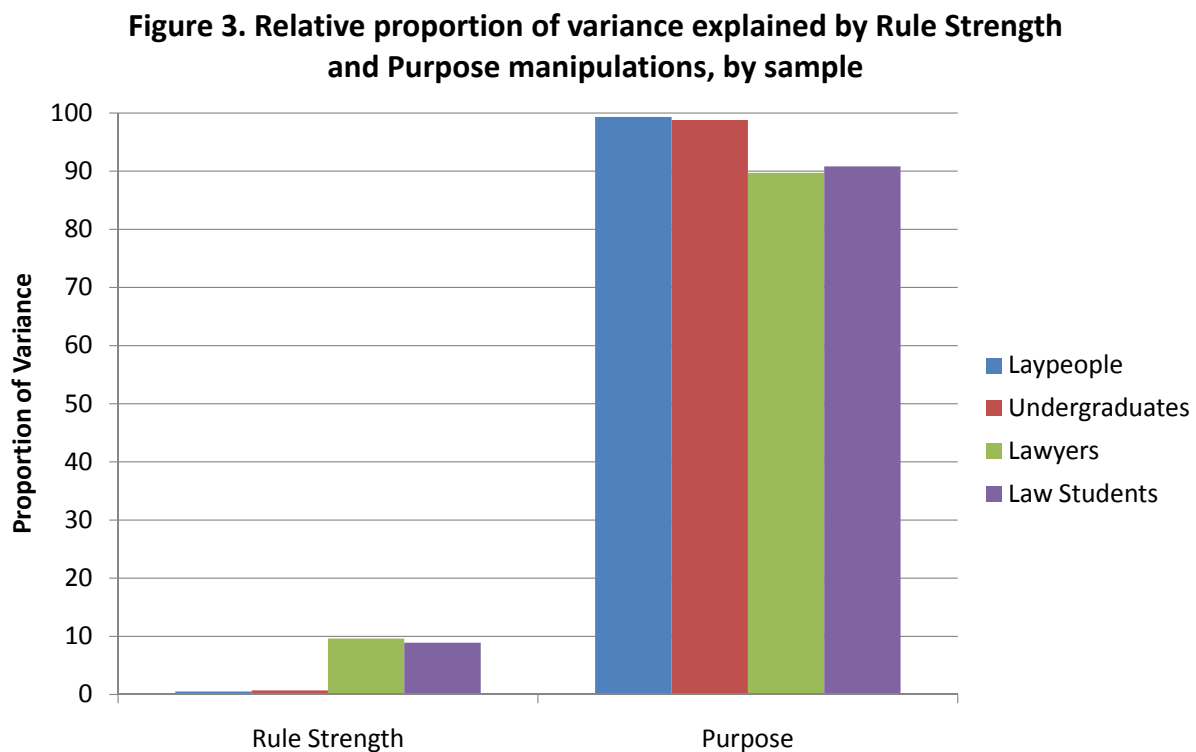
Regardless of Purpose, the Action manipulation only affected judgments if the teacher violated a mandatory rule. This pattern did not exist in samples of undergraduate students.



Results (continued)

Law students vs. Lawyers vs. Laypeople

Figure 3 compares the relative proportion of variance accounted for by the rule strength and purpose manipulations across four samples. (e.g., the rule strength numbers are calculated $[(\eta^2_{\text{rule}}) / (1 - \eta^2_{\text{error}})]$).



Between-Class comparisons

Finally, we examined the data between the first, second, and third-year law students, and found no main effects or interactions.

Discussion

-In accordance with the responses from other samples, law students will respond that rule adherence is more important than outcome fairness when asked directly.

-When judging the actions of an individual in a situation in which following rules and procedures would lead to an unjust outcome, law students responded that the more appropriate course of action would be to violate the rule.

-Although the experimental responses leaned toward an “outcome orientation,” law students exhibited a greater fixation on the technical aspects of rules than did samples from the general public.

-No cross-sectional differences were found among the classes (first, second, third) in the law student sample, suggesting the differences in judgments may be a selection factor, rather than a learned perspective.

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