

The Role of Context in Individuals' Preferences for Procedural Justice

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Abstract

Procedural justice theory generally asserts that individuals are quite sensitive to procedures, independent of outcomes. A growing body of research, however, demonstrates that in many situations, individuals will condone or even promote the violation of rules and the abandonment of procedures in order to bring about a desired outcome. Extending this previous work, we presented participants with three scenarios that varied in their societal importance: a baseball game, a high-school final exam, and a courtroom trial. Within each scenario, the protagonist was faced with the decision to violate a rule in order to bring about a just outcome, or to follow the rule and allow the unjust outcome to occur. We manipulated the protagonist's decision, such that half of the scenarios involved following the rule to its unjust result, and the other half involved breaking the rule to produce a just result. Among other questions, we asked participants to rate the appropriateness of the protagonist's actions. A clear difference in the participants' judgments emerged: When the context was of low societal importance (i.e., baseball game), participants strongly favored rule adherence; however, when the context was of high importance (i.e., courtroom), the participants favored just outcomes even achieving them meant violating rules and laws. Participants were split when the context was of moderate importance.

Introduction

Procedural justice research typically stresses the importance of procedural factors in individuals' satisfaction with their interactions with authorities.

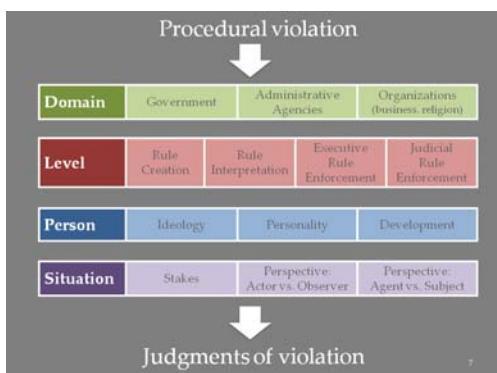
There are numerous situations in which individuals' concerns for the outcome of a decision will outweigh procedural concerns.

In previous research, our participants reported that, when a high-school teacher had a good reason to break a school-wide blind grading rule, the more appropriate action was to break the rule.

More generally, we found that, in our scenarios, participants would prefer a violation of procedural fairness over a violation of outcome fairness. (These findings were more true of democrat/liberal participants than with conservative / republicans.) But would these outcome fairness concerns occur in other contexts aside from a school/teacher scenario?

Schweitzer and Saks suggest a complex set of factors (excerpted in the figure to the right) that affect the extent to which individuals are oriented toward process or outcome concerns.

This research examines the extent to which process versus outcome concerns rule within two other contexts / domains: A courtroom and a baseball game.



Methodology

Sample: 213 undergraduate students

Presented scenarios in which there was a *good* purpose for a potential procedural violation (to correct an error). These situations were designed such that the protagonist in the story was faced with the decision to violate a rule to produce a just result, or to obey the rule and allow an unjust result. The scenarios are summarized in the table below.

Manipulated:

Context / Domain of the violation (described in the table below)

Action of the protagonist: obey vs. violate

Domain	Courtroom	School	Baseball
Agent	Judge	Teacher	Umpire
Subject	Defendant	Student	Baseball Player
Violation	Rules of evidence	Blind grading	Out vs. Safe
Error	Police send DNA evidence to wrong analysis lab	Secretary gives students wrong study guide	Grounds crew improperly attached bases; runner trips
Rationale: If not for the error...	Defendant would be found "not guilty"	Students would have received higher grades on exam	Runner would have safely made it to base.
Action (violation)	Throw out technically admissible evidence	Obtain blind grading codes; adjust grades	Call runner "safe" when technically out

Measured 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?*

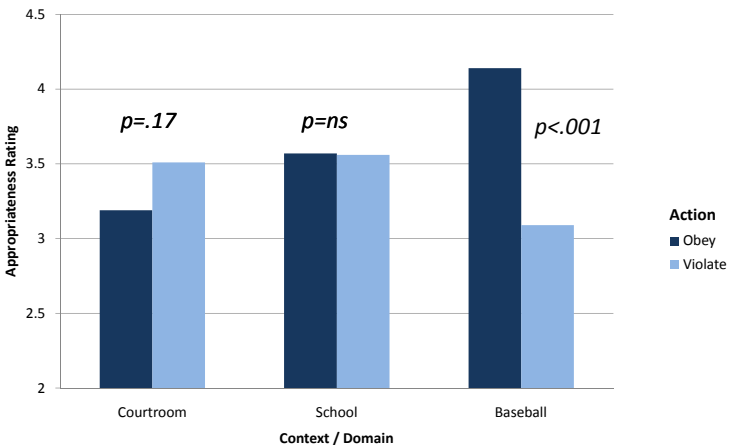
Items were entered into a principal axis factor analysis. A single factor emerged, explaining 61% of the total variance; alpha = .86. Items were combined into a single measure of "appropriateness."

Results

The relative balance between the bars indicates the extent to which the participants' responses were process oriented (dark bars higher than light) or outcome oriented (light bars higher than dark).

We found a significant three-way interaction ($p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .07$).

The results are illustrated in the figure below.



Discussion

In line with our previous research, in our courtroom situation, participants judged the actions of the protagonist more positively if he violated a procedural rule in order to bring about a just outcome. This demonstrates an outcome orientation.

In our classroom situation, the protagonist was judged roughly equally regardless of whether he violated procedure toward a just result, or followed procedure to an unjust result.

Finally, in the baseball situation, the participants quite strongly preferred that the protagonist follow procedure, even if it led to an unjust result.

Why?

The idea behind this research was to show that the extent to which procedures and outcomes matter to individuals differs between various contexts or domains. We believe it is the relevance of the domain to an individual's sense of global justice & importance that determines whether process or outcome concerns dominate: Court procedure has a basis in broader justice issues; baseball rules do not.

The stakes:

In ongoing research, we have manipulated the stakes of the courtroom and baseball situations. Our preliminary results (as of the week of this conference) suggest that the stakes of the situation affect judgments within the courtroom (rules matter less in low-stakes situations); however, regardless of the stakes, baseball remains a must-follow-the-rules domain.

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