

Interactional Fairness Judgments: The Influence of Causal Accounts

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There has been an increasing amount of research conducted on issues of procedural justice. Although this research has demonstrated that the type of procedure used to allocate outcomes has an independent influence on people's judgments of the fairness of a decision, there is growing empirical evidence that such judgments are influenced by the enactment of the procedure as well. Fairness concerns raised about the propriety of a decision maker's behavior during the enactment of procedures are representative of a desire for interactional justice. In this paper, we present three studies that examine the effects of giving a causal account, or a justification, versus not providing a justification, on judgments of interactional fairness and endorsement of a decision maker's actions. In Study 1, a laboratory study, ratings of interactional fairness and support for a manager were higher when subjects received a causal account that claimed mitigating circumstances for a manager's improper action than when they did not receive such a causal account. A second laboratory study replicated the same pattern of findings in two different organizational contexts. In addition, it was found that the perceived adequacy of the causal account was a critical factor explaining its effect. In Study 3, a field setting, ratings of both interactional fairness and procedural fairness were higher when a manager provided an adequate causal account to justify the allocation of an unfavorable outcome. The discussion focuses on the implications of these findings for research on interactional and procedural justice.

KEY WORDS: procedural justice; organizational behavior; social psychology; accountability; attribution.

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INTRODUCTION

I made a lot of tough decisions as a manager. Although I may not always be right, I try to be fair. In my twenty years as a manager, I've learned that much of what is meant by being "fair" really means treating people with respect. For example, I always explain to my people *why* I did what I did. Even as president of this division, I justify my decisions. I think that is part of my moral obligation as a manager. My people think it's only fair.

From an interview with the president of a division of a Fortune 500 consumer products company

Stimulated by the pioneering studies of Thibaut and Walker (1975) on different methods of dispute resolution, there has been an increasing amount of research conducted on issues of procedural fairness (see Folger and Greenberg, 1985, for a comprehensive review). The primary focus of this research has been on examining people's reactions to different types of procedures. Examples of different procedures that have been studied include (i) adversarial and inquisitorial modes of dispute resolution (e.g., Lind *et al.*, 1980); (ii) arbitration and mediation (e.g., Brett and Shapiro, 1985); (iii) the opportunity to exercise "voice" (e.g., Folger, 1977); and (iv) diary-keeping in performance appraisal (e.g., Greenberg, 1986). One of the major findings of this stream of research is that the type of procedure used to allocate outcomes has an influence on people's judgments of the fairness of a decision that is independent of outcome favorability (Folger and Greenberg, 1985). In particular, people feel less dissatisfied with an unfavorable outcome when they perceive the procedure to be fair (e.g., Lind *et al.*, 1980).

Although the type of decision-making procedure is important in understanding peoples' reactions to the fairness of a decision, there is growing empirical evidence that people focus on the enactment of the procedure as well. In a study of job candidates' reactions to corporate recruiting procedures, Bies (1985) found that people distinguished procedural considerations from those dealing with the process itself in describing fair and unfair recruiting activities. For example, consistent with previous research on procedural justice (e.g., Folger, 1977; Thibaut and Walker, 1975), people felt fairly treated when they had opportunity to fully present their case to the interviewers, but felt unfairly treated when they were denied that chance. However, separate from these procedural considerations, they also mentioned interactional considerations such as the perceived truthfulness of the interviewer's communication and respectful treatment (e.g., whether the interviewer asked job-relevant or -irrelevant questions of the candidate) as criteria they used to evaluate the fairness of recruiting procedures. Similarly, Sheppard and Lewicki (this issue) found that executives distinguish the procedure from its enactment when they describe fair and unfair treatment in different areas of management responsibility (e.g., planning, motivating).

Fairness concerns raised about the propriety of the decision maker's behavior during the enactment of procedures are representative of a desire for *interactional justice* (Bies and Moag, 1986). During the enactment of procedures, people are particularly sensitive to the processes of interpersonal communication and decision making. For example, people have normative expectations for truthfulness and respect in communication (Bies and Moag, 1986). In addition, people have expectations that a decision maker will properly enact the rules of the procedure (cf. Lind and Lissak, 1985).

However, despite the best efforts and good intentions of decision makers, they sometimes enact procedures in ways that deviate from norms and expectations concerning an "ideal" process. For example, most of us are familiar with increasingly long delays in the journal review process even though there are guidelines concerning turnaround time. Similarly, we hear complaints about the sarcastic nature of some reviewers' comments. Since the journal review process is so central to our careers and mental health (for a discussion of these issues, see Cummings and Frost, 1985), one would expect that delays and rude behavior would always result in claims of unfair treatment. Yet, under such circumstances, we have observed that some of our colleagues complain that they were unfairly treated while others do not.

One explanation for these differences in interactional fairness judgments is that some journal editors may provide reasons to explain the delays or the reviewer's rudeness while other editors may not (Bies and Moag, 1986). In organizational contexts, such reasons can be found in *causal accounts* (Bies, 1987)—that is, explanations regarding a person's responsibility for his or her actions. For example, a journal editor may explain that the delay in the turnaround time is due to an increase in manuscript submissions. Or, concerning a reviewer's sarcastic comments, the editor may explain that such rude behavior is the result of the reviewer being overburdened by an increase in journal-related responsibilities. In providing such causal accounts, the editor is claiming that deviations from an ideal process are due to mitigating circumstances (i.e., that the person is not fully responsible for his or her actions). Since previous research has suggested that giving such a causal account is associated with greater feelings of interactional fairness (Bies and Moag, 1986), we need to know why that kind of justification influences peoples' fairness judgments.

A causal account claiming mitigating circumstances may contribute to the perception of interactional fairness because it attempts to eliminate a worst-case reading of the decision maker's intentions (Schlenker, 1980). For example, if the journal editor was silent as to why there was a delay in the review process or the sarcastic nature of the reviewer's comments, then we might likely infer from the absence of "discounting" evidence as provided by a causal account (cf. Kelley, 1972) that such actions were intentional or deliberate.

Since the perceived intentions of another person can influence perceptions of unfair treatment (cf. Garrett and Libby, 1973; Leventhal *et al.*, 1969; Reis and Mims, 1982), the absence of any causal account for improper action should undermine the feelings of interactional fairness (Bies and Moag, 1986). Conversely, a causal account claiming mitigating circumstances should enhance the perception of interactional fairness. As a result, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis. The presence of a causal account claiming mitigating circumstances regarding improper action during the enactment of a procedure will result in higher ratings of interactional fairness relative to the absence of a causal account in a similar situation.

The absence of any causal account is likely to result in feelings of resentment toward the editor in our example (cf. Folger and Martin, in press). As such, a causal account may act to protect the editor from potential negative moral evaluations (cf. Ross and DiTecco, 1975). For example, if a delay in turnaround time is perceived to be the result of mitigating circumstances rather than being intentional and deliberate, then he or she might be expected to incur less blame or disapproval (Fincham and Jaspars, 1980). Conversely, the presence of a causal account claiming mitigating circumstances might be expected to contribute to higher ratings of approval relative to the absence of a causal account.

The work of Folger and his colleagues provides some evidence in support of this reasoning (e.g., Folger, in press). For example, in a study by Folger and Martin (in press), subjects competed with each other in a winner-takes-all competition. The set of rules were announced before the competition, but changes in the rules for distributing the outcomes were announced after the competition was over. All subjects were informed that they had lost the competition. However, half of the subjects were provided good reasons and half of the subjects were provided poor reasons for changing the rules. In addition, half of the subjects were given the opportunity to "recommend the experimenter for a permanent job as research assistant" while the other half were not provided that option. Folger and Martin predicted there would be a main effect of justification on subjects' hiring recommendations. As expected, they found that people were more willing to recommend the experimenter when the reasons for changing the rules suggested there were mitigating circumstances for such an action. Although these researchers did not have a direct measure of approval for the experimenter's actions, it seems likely that the recommendation to hire a person reflects an endorsement of that person. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis. The presence of a causal account claiming mitigating circumstances regarding improper action during the enactment of a procedure will result in higher ratings of approval relative to the absence of a causal account in a similar situation.

To date, no empirical research has examined the relationship between causal accounts and interactional fairness judgments. Such research is important for two reasons. First, the cognitive appraisal of an injustice should be an important mediating variable in explaining different emotions and behaviors in response to that situation (cf. Lazarus, 1982). Although Folger and Martin (in press) proposed to examine the influence of causal accounts on perceptions of fairness, they did not measure such cognitive processes directly. Instead, they focused on other responses, such as feelings of resentment and hiring behavior. Second, people may make inferences about the fairness of the procedure from the actions of the decision makers (Bies and Moag, 1986). As such, we need to investigate what factors may influence a person's appraisal of a decision maker's actions.

STUDY 1

Study 1 tested the propositions that a causal account in which mitigating circumstances are claimed for a manager's improper actions will enhance ratings of interactional fairness and support for the decision maker relative to an identical situation in which no causal account is provided.

Method

Subjects and Design

Subjects were 38 male and 18 female graduate business school students enrolled in an evening MBA program in the Chicago area who volunteered to participate in the study. Subjects were assigned randomly to one of the two experimental conditions. There were 28 subjects in each condition.

The overall design of the experiment was a completely randomized two-group single-factor design. One group received a causal account claiming mitigating circumstances for the manager's improper action and the other group did not receive such information.

Procedure and Materials

Subjects were told they were participating in a research investigation of managerial decision-making processes. They were given a package of materials in a folder, which included a case about an employee grievance. This case involved an assistant brand manager at a large consumer products firm who felt he had not received due recognition for his development of a new promotion plan. The limited information in the case suggested that the plan was indeed developed by the assistant brand manager, but his "boss"

received the social and financial recognition for the ideas. This information created a scenario in which the boss may have “used” his subordinate to receive recognition from top management. Each subject was asked to take the role of an arbitrator and make a recommendation on the grievance concerning the apparently improper actions. The materials were developed by the senior author from interviews with marketing administrators for the purposes of this study. The names of people and products were changed to protect confidentiality.

As part of the materials, subjects were given memos containing comments allegedly from “other” managers who were present at a meeting during which the boss presented the new promotion plan. These managers were described as being “unbiased” observers. The memos included the experimental manipulations of causal accounts.

In the *mitigating circumstances causal account* condition, subjects read the following memo:

The Creamy Swirl promotion looks exciting and has considerable potential. The meeting itself was interesting. When Mike introduced the plan, he mentioned his assistant brand manager’s efforts and contribution. The meeting was slow and detailed as it began. At the coffee break, Mike talked to some of us about our reactions and those of the boss. He told us he wanted to present it well so his assistant could get appropriate recognition. We told Mike that he needed to change his approach to get the group brand director’s approval. In the discussion after the break, Mike got more excited and referred to it as “his plan.” Based on our talk at the break, I don’t think he meant to claim credit by using those words, but wanted to demonstrate his support for and commitment to the plan. Mike tried to share the recognition, but the group brand director felt that Mike was just being humble. I don’t think Mike intended things to happen this way. In any event, the new promotion plan is a good one and should increase our market share.

Subjects in the *no causal account* condition did not receive a memo concerning the boss’s intentions and motives.

In addition to the causal account memo, all subjects read two “filler” memos which contained no causal information that briefly described the meeting in neutral terms. For example, each memo referred to the meeting as a “good one” that “raised issues.” Also, there was reference to the fact that the meeting had “one coffee-break where we got to talk to other managers.” There was *no* reference to the boss in either memo. These two filler memos were the only pieces of information that subjects in the no causal account condition received. Extensive pretesting was conducted to ensure that they provided no confounding information when the filler memos were presented in the context of the causal account memo. The filler memos were used in order to minimize the “obviousness” of the hypotheses and to increase the plausibility of making decisions with all types of information.

Dependent Measures

After the case and memos were presented, subjects were asked a series of questions. On a 9-point scale with 1 = very unfair and 9 = very fair, subjects rated whether the subordinate had been treated fairly by his boss in the situation. In addition, on 9-point scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much so) subjects were asked to rate the degree to which they (i) approved of the actions of the boss, (ii) felt the boss had betrayed the assistant brand manager, and (iii) felt the boss should be reprimanded for his actions. The responses to the three questions were highly intercorrelated (mean $r = .62$). Thus, they were summed to create an Approval Index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$).

Manipulation Check Questions

Three questions assessed the effectiveness of the manipulation. The questions, measured on 9-point scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much so) were:

1. Did you get the impression that Mike Cushing intentionally tried to gain the full credit for the promotion plan?
2. Did you get the impression that unforeseen factors in the situation had an important impact on Mike Cushing's actions? (reverse scaled)
3. Did you get the impression that Mike Cushing purposely took full credit for the new Creamy Swirl promotion plan?

The responses to the three questions were highly intercorrelated (mean $r = .65$). Thus, they were summed to create a Causal Account Index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). After completing the questionnaire, the subjects were debriefed.

Results

The check on the validity of the independent variable manipulation indicated that it was successful in establishing the desired perceptions. Specifically, the results confirmed that the causal account information was perceived correctly, $F(2, 81) = 33.54, p < 0.0001$. As expected, subjects in the mitigating circumstances causal account condition ($\bar{X} = 10.0$) perceived significantly less intentionality in the actions of the boss relative to subjects in the no causal account condition ($\bar{X} = 16.8$).

Judgments of Interactional Fairness

The mean ratings of interactional fairness were significant between the two causal account conditions, $F(1, 54) = 8.48, p < 0.001, \omega^2 = .12$. Subjects in the mitigating circumstances causal account condition rated interactional fairness significantly higher ($\bar{X} = 3.7$) than those who were in the no causal account condition ($\bar{X} = 2.3$). Thus, with regard to the judgment of interactional fairness, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Approval of the Boss's Actions

For the approval of the boss's actions, there was a significant main effect of causal accounts, $F(1, 54) = 9.49, p < 0.01, \omega^2 = .14$. As predicted, the subjects' approval rating of the boss's actions were a function of causal accounts in a similar pattern to that of the processual fairness judgments. Subjects gave a higher approval rating to the boss in the mitigating circumstances causal account condition ($\bar{X} = 14.4$) than did the subjects in the no causal account condition ($\bar{X} = 10.0$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 support the hypotheses that a causal account claiming mitigating circumstances will enhance ratings of interactional fairness and approval ratings of the boss relative to the absence of a causal account. When there is the appearance of impropriety during the enactment of a procedure, the data suggest that fairness judgments and reactions to decision makers are mediated by reception of a causal account.

There are limitations to the generalizability of the results of this study, however. First, the construct of interactional fairness was operationalized with only one question and it can be argued that this question was too situation-specific. To address this problem, multiple operationalization of the construct is necessary to establish the generalizability of these results. Second, it can be argued that the pattern of our findings may be specific to the organizational context used in the experiment. If another study, using different contexts, found a similar pattern of findings, this, too, should contribute to the generalizability of the conclusions of Study 1. To deal with these limitations, a second experiment was conducted that used a multiple operationalization of the interactional fairness construct, and which used two different organizational contexts.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we replicated the mitigating circumstances versus no causal account comparison. In addition, two different organizational contexts were used in this study. One context involved a sales purchase decision and the other setting was a budget decision context. In both organizational settings, there was the appearance of improper behavior by the decision maker during the implementation of the organizational procedures. As in Study 1, it was hypothesized that a causal account claiming mitigating circumstances would result in higher ratings of interactional fairness and higher approval ratings of the decision maker.

Method

Subjects and Design

Subjects were 50 male and 37 female currently employed graduate and undergraduate business school volunteers. All were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. The average age of the participants was 26 years old, and their average work experience was 7 years.

The overall design of the experiment was a 2×2 factorial design in which the independent variables were causal accounts (none, mitigating circumstances) and the organizational context (sales purchase decision, budget decision).

Procedure and Materials

Subjects were told they were part of a study examining “human relations” issues in organizations. Subjects were presented with a case that was based on a composite of actual events involving an allocation decision in an organizational setting. The stimulus materials for the experiment were developed out of interviews with managers and lower-level employees in a field setting. The case included a description of the situation and a letter in which the news about the allocation was delivered. The subjects were asked to take the role of the person receiving the news. In the case, the subjects were apparently deceived by the decision maker about the size of the potential sale or budget that they would receive (the improper behavior). In the sales context, the salesperson received a “smaller than expected” sale. In the

second organizational context, the manager who submitted the request received a "smaller than expected" budget.

The subjects were asked to read the case and an attached letter. The letter included the experimental manipulation of the causal account variable. The letter made reference to a \$205,000 sales proposal (or budget request). To manipulate the perception of an unfavorable outcome, the actual amount received was \$145,000. Extensive pretesting determined that the difference between the former and latter amount was sufficient to be characterized as an unfavorable outcome. All subjects received the same unfavorable outcome.

Following this introductory paragraph, the causal account manipulation was delivered. In the *mitigating circumstances causal account* condition, subjects read:

As you know, an important source of information which influences my purchase decision (budget decision) involves the economic conditions facing my division. Two of our customers have cut back on their orders for the coming year due to some economic troubles they are experiencing at this time. As a result, our revenues are projected to be less than expected. To deal with this situation, a ceiling has been placed on the amount of any new divisional expenditures (budget allotments). Thus, this change in the economic environment had an important bearing on the decision concerning your sales contract (budget request).

In the *no causal account* condition, subjects did not receive any explanation or justification.

Dependent Measures

After the case and memos were read by the subjects, they were asked a series of questions. Interactional fairness was measured with three items that were derived from research conducted by the first author (Bies, 1985). On 9-point scales, subjects rated the degree to which the decision maker had (i) treated the person fairly, (ii) treated the person in an arbitrary manner (reverse scaled), and (iii) acted openly and honestly. The responses to three questions were highly intercorrelated (mean $r = .45$). Thus, they were summed to create an Interactional fairness Index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$). On 9-point scales, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much so) subjects were asked to what degree (i) they approved of the manager's action and (ii) whether they felt the justification in the causal account was adequate enough.

Manipulation Check Questions

Three questions assessed the effectiveness of the causal account manipulation. Two of the questions, measured on 9-point scales varying from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much so) were (i) Do you have a general under-

standing of the reasons for the decision? (ii) Did you get the impression that Malcolm Wilson was primarily influenced by factors external to his firm in his decision making process? In a third question, subjects were asked to allocate up to 100 points among those factors that they felt were responsible for the unfavorable outcome. The number of points allocated to "mitigating circumstances" were divided by a factor of 10 and used as another check on the manipulation. The responses to the three questions were highly inter-correlated (mean $r = .42$). Thus, they were summed to create a Causal Account Index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$). After completing the questionnaire, the subjects were debriefed.

Results

Manipulation Check

The check on the validity of the causal account variable manipulation indicated that it was successful in establishing the desired perceptions, $F(1, 83) = 71.63, p < 0.001$. Subjects in the mitigating circumstances causal account condition attributed the outcome more to mitigating factors ($\bar{X} = 18.7$) than subjects in the no causal account condition ($\bar{X} = 10.7$). The pattern was the same in both organizational contexts.

Judgments of Interactional Fairness

The terms of interactional fairness judgments, there was a significant main effect for causal account, $F(1, 83) = 15.01, p < 0.001, \omega^2 = .12$, but no significant main effect or organizational context nor significant interaction involving that factor ($F < 1$). Relative to the condition in which no causal account was given, the causal account claim of mitigating circumstances resulted in higher ratings of interactional fairness in the sales purchase context (19.0 vs. 15.2) and the budget decision context (18.4 vs. 14.4).

To further explore why causal accounts are effective in enhancing feelings of interactional fairness, we entered the subjects' ratings of the adequacy of the justification for the causal account as a covariate into the analysis of interactional fairness judgments. The analysis of covariance found that the adequacy of justification variables was highly significant, $F(1, 83) = 38.84, p < 0.001, \omega^2 = .30$, while the causal account manipulation was no longer statistically significant ($F < 1$). Thus, although Hypothesis 1 was supported again, it was the adequacy of the justification in support of the causal account, rather than the specific claim itself, which accounted for the variance in people's reactions.

Approval of the Decision Maker's Actions

In terms of approval ratings, there was a main effect for causal account, $F(1, 83) = 11.76, p < 0.001, \omega^2 = .10$, but no significant main effect of organizational context nor significant interaction involving that factor ($F < 1$). Relative to the absence of a causal account, the causal account claiming mitigating circumstances resulted in higher approval ratings of the decision maker's actions in the sales purchase context (7.1 vs 4.8) and the budget decision context (5.9 vs. 4.8).

Once again, we entered the subjects' ratings of the adequacy of the justification for the causal account as a covariate into the analysis of managerial approval. The analysis of covariance found that the adequacy of justification was highly significant $F(1, 83) = 38.84, p < 0.001, \omega^2 = .30$, while the causal account manipulation was no longer statistically significant ($F < 1$). Thus, although Hypothesis 2 was supported again, the perceived adequacy of the justification was more important than the causal account claim in explaining the pattern of approval ratings.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 corroborate those of Study 1. Using a better measure of interactional fairness and two different organizational contexts, a causal account claiming mitigating circumstances was found to result in higher ratings of interactional fairness and support for the manager than when no causal account was given. An analysis of covariance suggested that it is the perceived adequacy of the justification that is the critical factor influencing judgments of interactional fairness. This finding suggests that the mere providing of a causal account claiming mitigating circumstances is not sufficient to enhance ratings of interactional fairness and support for the manager; rather, such a causal account must be perceived as *adequate* in order to do so. Thus, the results of Study 2 support and amplify the conclusions derived from the first study.

Although Studies 1 and 2 indicate that an adequate causal account can influence people's judgments of interactional fairness and approval ratings of organizational decisionmakers, these studies do not indicate whether causal accounts are important in naturally occurring assessments of organizational procedures and decision makers. Accordingly, in the next study we examined the influence of causal accounts in naturally occurring evaluations of organizational decision makers.

STUDY 3

In this study, we conducted a survey on people's reactions to a typical organizational outcome—the rejection of a proposal or a policy recommendation. Although the primary purpose of this survey was to replicate the laboratory findings in a naturally occurring field setting, it provided an opportunity to examine the influence of a causal account on judgments of procedural fairness as well. To date, no research has examined the latter relationship, even though some theorists suggest that a causal account is an important aspect of the concept of “due process”—that is, fair procedures (Aram and Silapante, 1981). This study represents the first empirical test of such conjectures.

As independent variables, we measured the presence of a causal account claim and the perceived adequacy of its justification. As dependent variables we measured interactional fairness judgments, procedural fairness judgments, approval of the boss's actions, and affective reactions in response to the decision.

Method

Subjects

The 102 participants in this survey were volunteers from three different subgroups. The sample included 45 currently employed people who were enrolled in an evening MBA program, 33 students in a day MBA program who had at least 2 year's work experience, and 24 people currently employed in a finance, advertising, or consumer products company. The average age of this sample was 29 years and the average amount of working experience was 6.5 years. The sample included 48 men and 54 women.

Materials

In this survey, participants were asked to recount a specific “rejection” experience with their current boss. They were asked to provide as much detail as possible about the situation, including the actual dialogue. This episode provided the stimulus for the participants to respond to the survey questions.

The causal account claim variable was measured with a single item. On a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so), subjects were asked

to evaluate the degree to which their boss claimed the rejection was due to circumstances beyond his or her control. To test the reliability of this one-item measure, we correlated this ordinal rating with the judgments of two independent raters who coded the recounted experiences for the presence or absence of this type of causal account. To do so, the one scale item was transformed into nominal data by categorizing all ratings less than the midpoint anchor of "to some degree," to reflect absence of a causal account and those from the midpoint and above to reflect the presence of a causal account. The chi-square analysis generated a gamma coefficient of .96 for the causal account, suggesting that the one item was a reliable measure to be used in the regression analyses.

In addition, on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so), subjects evaluated the adequacy of the causal account with this item: "Did your boss provide an adequate explanation for the refusal?" The two independent variables were weakly correlated, $r = .07$, ns.

Interactional fairness was measured with three questions. On 7-point scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so), the participants rated the degree to which they felt that their boss (i) had treated them fairly or unfairly in this situation, (ii) was honest or dishonest, and (iii) had properly enacted the procedure in evaluating the proposal/request. The reliability of this five-item scale was .80.

Procedural fairness was measured with two questions with end points of 1 = very unfair and 7 = very fair. The subjects rated the degree to which they felt that (i) the decision-making process was fair or unfair, and (ii) the boss made his/her decision in a way that was fair or unfair. The reliability of this two-item scale was .93.

The subjects rated their approval of the boss's handling of the situation with two items on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (strongly disapprove) to 7 (strongly approve). On a second 7-point question, the subjects rated the degree to which they felt more or less favorable toward their boss ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a lot). The reliability of this two-item scale was .83.

As an indicator of affective response, we asked the participants to describe their feelings of (i) anger, (ii) resentment, and (iii) outrage on 7-point scales. The reliability of this three-item scale was .90.

RESULTS

We used regression analysis to establish the relative influence of a causal account claim and the adequacy of justification in the allocation of an unfavorable outcome. Examination of the effects of the causal account claim and its justification, shown in Table I, indicate that with each of the depen-

Table I. The Influence of Causal Accounts in a Naturally Occurring Environment: Study 3^a

Independent variables	Interactional fairness	Procedural fairness	Approval ratings	Affective reactions
	Beta weights			
Causal account claim	.01	.08	.05	.05
Adequacy of justification	.83 ^b	.76 ^b	.75 ^b	.55 ^b
Total (<i>R</i> ²)	.69 ^b	.58 ^b	.55 ^b	.30 ^b
	Usefulness analysis			
Claim beyond justification	.00	.00	.00	.00
Justification beyond claim	.69 ^b	.57 ^b	.55 ^b	.30 ^b

^aVariance accounted for is indexed by the multiple correlation coefficient. High scores indicate feelings of processual fairness, feelings of procedural fairness, high approval ratings, and positive emotions. Pairwise deletion was utilized. Total sample size was 102. ^b*p* < 0.001.

dent variables, the adequacy of justification dimension exercised a stronger influence than the causal account claim. In the case of interactional fairness judgments, the adequacy of justification $\beta = .83, p < 0.001$, and the causal account claim $\beta = .01, ns$. In the case of procedural fairness judgments, the adequacy of justification $\beta = .76, p < 0.001$, and the causal account claim $\beta = .08, ns$. In the case of approval ratings, the adequacy of justification $\beta = .75, p < 0.001$, and the causal account claim $\beta \setminus .05, ns$. In the case of affective reactions, the adequacy of justification $\beta = .55, p < 0.001$, and the causal account claim $\beta = .05, ns$.

We also assessed the relative influence of the causal account and the adequacy of justification variables by examining the ability of each to explain variables beyond that explained by the other. This analysis, also shown in Table I, replicated the results described above. In each comparison adequacy of justification explained greater variance beyond the causal account claim, whereas causal account claim did not explain significantly more variance than the adequacy of justification considered alone.

Discussion

Taken together, these results are consistent with Studies 1 and 2 and provide support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. In addition, they suggest that a causal account of mitigating circumstances is not in and of itself sufficient to enhance perceptions of interactional fairness or procedural fairness. Rather, the causal account must be perceived as adequate to have the latter effects. Hence the *adequacy* of the justification, rather than the claim itself, explains

most of the variance in people's feelings of fairness and manager approval in the context of unfavorable managerial action. Given the naturally occurring environment in which this study occurred, the pattern of findings concerning the influence of causal accounts adds considerably to the validity of the conclusions drawn from the two laboratory simulation studies. As such, we may confidently conclude that adequate causal accounts are critical inputs to interactional and procedural fairness judgments. The implications of these findings are discussed below.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The purpose of our studies was to examine the extent to which a causal account could influence people's reactions to a decision maker's behavior during the enactment of organizational procedures. All three studies are consistent in suggesting that a causal account claiming mitigating circumstances enhances the perception of interactional fairness and approval of the decision maker's actions. The third study suggests that a causal account can influence the perception of procedural fairness as well. These results are consistent with recent critiques of equity theory claiming that fairness judgments are based primarily on attributional information (Cohen, 1982; see Greenberg, 1984, for a review of this literature).

The findings of the three studies concerning the influence of a causal account are consistent with field research on interactional fairness. For example, Bies (1985) found that job candidates expected a causal account when their interviews were canceled or they received a rejection letter. The failure to receive such a justification was cited as the basis for claiming unfair treatment. Related to this latter finding, Sheppard and Lewicki (this issue) found that executives have similar expectations for justification concerning the assignment of blame. Taken together, data from both laboratory experiments and field surveys consistently demonstrate that a causal account can influence judgments of interactional fairness.

The results of Studies 2 and 3 suggest that we need to distinguish between two different dimensions of a justification to more fully understand why a causal account influences people's perceptions. Specifically, one needs to take into consideration the influence of the specific claim of a causal account (e.g., mitigating circumstances) versus the perceived adequacy of the justification for the claim. The results of both studies suggest the perceived adequacy of the reasons in support of the claim is significantly more important than the claim itself in influencing interactional fairness judgments and support for managerial action. These findings are consistent with the research of Folger and his colleagues (Folger *et al.*, 1983; Folger and Martin, in press) which shows that providing an adequate, not poor, justification for changes

in allocation procedures mitigates feelings of discontent. It may be that explanations are *not* processed “mindlessly” (cf. Langer, 1978), at least when they are offered in the context of unfavorable outcomes. Acting as “intuitive jurists” (cf. Hamilton, 1980), people seek to determine the decision maker’s responsibility for the impropriety as a basis for evaluating whether that person had acted fairly. Such an evaluation requires a sufficient amount of proof to mitigate the decision maker’s responsibility. As such, the adequacy of the justification is an important consideration in people’s analysis of a decision maker’s behavior.

What constitutes adequacy of justification emerges as an important question for future research on interactional fairness. For example, is adequacy a reflection of the sheer number of arguments, that is, the amount of reasoning? Or, is the adequacy of justification more closely linked to the quality, not the quantity, of the argumentation (cf. Petty and Cacioppo, 1984)? Important quality dimensions might include sincerity and honesty (cf. Lewicki, 1983; Shapiro, 1985) as well as believability (Schlenker, 1980).

The results of Study 3 broaden the domain of theory and research on procedural justice to include causal accounts or justification. Although the concept of due process in organizations includes justification (e.g., Aram and Silapante, 1981), current models of fair procedures have neglected this variable (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut and Walker, 1975). This is surprising since court trial and arbitration procedures require a causal account along with the verdict. Causal accounts contribute to the appearance of fair procedures because they allow people to determine whether the decision maker has suppressed his or her biases and acted according to the prevailing norms of morality (cf. Leventhal, 1980).

Although the theories of procedural justice have ignored justification (cf. Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut and Walker, 1975), many of the empirical studies have not. For example, many of the later studies (e.g., Lind *et al.*, 1980) included a causal account as part of announcing the verdict outcome. While these researchers concluded from their studies that it was the disputants’ greater degree of process control (e.g., chance to fully present their “case” to a third party) that enhanced their satisfaction with an unfavorable outcome, it may have been that receiving a causal account along with the verdict had an independent or interactive influence as well. Indeed, the results of our three studies demonstrate that a causal account can have such an effect on people’s fairness judgments. Thus, future research in procedural justice needs to examine the separate influence of procedural variables, such as the distribution of process control, and interactional variables, such as the perceived adequacy of causal accounts, on perceptions of procedural fairness.

The effect of causal accounts on procedural fairness judgments contributes additional complexity and insight to the justice-based explanation of leader endorsement put forth by some researchers, most notably by Tyler

and his associates (Tyler and Caine, 1981; Tyler *et al.*, 1985). According to the justice-based explanation, procedural fairness judgments are critical inputs to support for leadership. The present study suggests that this perspective needs to take into consideration the leader's perceived motives and intentions when there is the appearance of impropriety. For example, the mere violation of procedures may be insufficient to create the feelings of unfairness and outrage which might contribute to the withdrawal of support. Our data suggest that such feelings are predicated upon the perception of the violator's intentionality. However, if a leader can provide an adequate causal account claiming mitigating circumstances, then he or she may be able to maintain control and authority in the context of apparent impropriety. It should not be too surprising that many leaders are sensitive to the causal analyses of their actions in times of "trouble." Motivated by self-presentational concerns (Bies, 1987; Reis, 1981), leaders will attempt to manage people's interpretations of any impropriety to maintain the appearance of fairness during the enactment of procedures.

The use of causal accounts, however, is not without potential costs. For example, there is the issue of believability when it is provided. If the causal account is flawed or found to be untrue, then there is good possibility of future mistrust and anger on the part of the receiver. In addition, a leader may be limited in how often he or she can continue to make "excuses" before his or her support begins to erode. These potential trade-offs to the use of causal accounts suggest a new direction for research on leader endorsement.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of all three studies suggest that (i) causal accounts claiming mitigating circumstances represent a critical input to judgments of interactional and procedural fairness and (ii) the perceived adequacy of justification for a causal account claim is more important than the claim itself in explaining people's reactions to unfavorable outcomes. The social informational context thus emerges as an important determinant of people's interactional and procedural fairness judgments (cf. Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). As such, what one *says* about the enactment of a procedure can be as important as what one *does* when he or she enacts the procedure.

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