

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF  
**Social  
Psychology**

2

**Roy F. Baumeister**  
*Florida State University*

**Kathleen D. Vohs**  
*University of Minnesota*

EDITORS

CAMBRIDGE  
610 KING ST. NORTH  
CAMBRIDGE, MA 02142

A SAGE Reference Publication

 **SAGE Publications**  
Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore

more applied areas of social psychology. For example, recent studies have examined social impact theory in the context of consumer behavior. In one study, researchers varied the size and proximity of a social presence in retail stores, and examined how this presence influenced shopping behavior. Furthermore, several tenets of social impact theory seem to predict political participation. One study found as the number of people eligible to vote increases, the proportion of people who actually vote asymptotically decreases. This finding accords with social impact theory, which predicts an increasingly marginal impact of sources as their number grows very large.

Social impact theory has enjoyed great theoretical and empirical attention, and it continues to inspire interesting scientific investigation.

Scott J. Moeller

Brad J. Bushman

See also Attitude Change; Influence; Persuasion

#### Further Readings

Harkins, S. G., & Latané, B. (1998). Population and political participation: A social impact analysis of voter responsibility. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 2, 192-207.

Latané, B., & Wolf, S. (1981). The social impact of majorities and minorities. *Psychological Review*, 88, 438-453.

---

## SOCIAL INFLUENCE

---

See INFLUENCE

---

## SOCIAL JUSTICE ORIENTATION

---

### Definition

When, why, and how do people decide that something is fair or unfair? For the past half-century, social justice has been an active area of study for social psychologists. Social justice researchers study both individuals and groups, trying to understand how people make justice decisions and what they perceive and feel about the fairness of others' decisions.

## Social Justice Theories

### Just-World Theory

Do most people care about justice? Cynics say no and point out people's inhumanity to each other as proof. But Melvin Lerner proposed a theory called *belief in a just world*, stating that all people want to imagine that they live in a just world. Experiments show people's desire to maintain the illusion of fairness often leads them to do cruel acts. If someone receives bad outcomes, others look at the person and believe that he or she did something to deserve the bad outcomes. This belief shields observers from feeling vulnerable to unjust outcomes because they know that they themselves are not bad people, but the process also results in victim blaming.

### Distributive Justice

How do people decide that something is just or not? In social psychology, early research approached this question by focusing on distributions, arguing that it is how things of value are distributed that guides people's feelings and perceptions regarding justice. Of particular importance to researchers was equity theory. The central point of equity theory states that every justice decision is determined by comparisons between people. According to equity theory, one person will compare his or her inputs and outcomes to the inputs and outcomes of another. An input is what you put into the situation (e.g., studying for an exam, being smart in a subject) and the output is what you get out of the situation (e.g., the grade on the test).

An example illustrates the process. Imagine that two coworkers in a firm are working equally hard and well on an important project that will determine the amount of their bonus checks. If the supervisor decides to give a big bonus check to one and a little check to the other, the latter employee would likely find the situation unjust and would find the situation more unjust than if no bonus were given.

Equity theory applies well to most economic transactions, but the input-outcome calculations are not the only method for deciding whether a distribution of rewards is fair. According to Morton Deutsch, when people make justice decisions regarding social relationships, equality is preferred over equity. In a social situation, an equal division of costs and benefits seems the most fair. Thus, for example, when you go out to dinner with friends, it usually seems as fair just

to split the bill as it does to calculate precisely the cost of each person's meal. A third consideration is need. Deutsch argued that when making justice decisions regarding personal development and welfare, people will be most likely to consider the needs of those affected by the justice decision. It seems fair to buy shoes for the baby even though the baby has brought no income into the house, and it seems fair to put the baby's needs in front of the mother's or father's needs.

### Procedural Justice

Researchers have noticed that sometimes people feel upset with an interaction even though they obtain the desired outcome. People also often accept decisions that are not to their advantage if they view the decision-making process as fair. The researchers began to look beyond simple questions about distributions of outcomes and instead turned their attention toward the *ways* in which outcomes are distributed; thus, the field of procedural justice was born.

A good example of the power of procedural justice is an effect researchers call *voice*. If a person has an opportunity to express his or her views to decision makers, that person will be more likely to find the outcome fair. Imagine, for example, that your town wants to knock down several houses to make way for a new interstate highway. If the town holds hearings where citizens can voice their concerns, homeowners will find the situations less unjust than if the town has no meetings—even if the meetings occur after the decision to demolish!

Why do procedures have such an effect on the perception of justice? Tom Tyler has noticed that procedures matter to people because fair treatment signals that one is regarded as a good person. When a person is treated fairly by other members of his or her group, the person feels respected, and when the person is treated fairly as a member of the group, he or she feels pride.

### Retributive Justice

For a long time, researchers concentrated on how people make decisions about justice but did not emphasize how people react in situations in which a wrong has already been committed. Several factors influence how people react to wrongs. If the harmful outcome seems accidental, there is less outrage; if the harm seems intentional, there is more outrage. Low outrage results in low punishment. Moderate outrage results in punishments that emphasize righting the

wrong done to the victim. High outrage results in punishment that takes away the privileges, rights, and even the life of the offender.

### Implications

Social justice continues to remain an important topic to study because of its far-reaching implications for both oppressed and powerful individuals and groups, particularly in the realm of affirmative action, legal, welfare, and environmental policy.

*Kristina R. Schmukler*  
*Elisabeth M. Thompson*  
*Faye J. Crosby*

*See also* Attitudes; Blaming the Victim; Distributive Justice; Equity Theory; Just-World Hypothesis; Procedural Justice

### Further Readings

- Deutsch, M. (1985). *Distributive justice: A social-psychological perspective*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lerner, M. J. (1980). *The belief in a just world: A fundamental delusion*. New York: Plenum.
- Skitka, L. J., & Crosby, F. J. (Eds.). (2003). New and current directions in justice theorizing and research [Special issue]. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 7(4).
- Tyler, T., & Blader, S. L. (2000). *Cooperation in groups: Procedural justice, social identity and behavioral engagement*. Philadelphia: Psychology Press.

---

## SOCIAL LEARNING

---

### Definition

Social learning refers to the learning that occurs in social contexts. More precisely, it refers to adaptive behavior change (learning) stemming from observing other people (or other animals), rather than learning from one's own direct experience. People acquire and change social behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions from observing and imitating the actions demonstrated by models such as parents or peers. This learning occurs from merely observing the actions of others and from observing the consequences of their actions. For example, if you see someone else touch a hot plate and then pull his or her hand away in pain, you do not have to imitate or repeat the action yourself: