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FAIRNESS IN THE CLASSROOM: AN EMPIRICAL EXTENSION OF THE NOTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

A strategy for enhancing perceptions of fairness in the classroom was empirically tested. Three sections of students were given the opportunity to participate in the grading of the presentations of their classmates. They perceived their presentation grades to be significantly more fair than the students in a fourth section who did not participate in the grading. This was the case even though the grades in the non-participating section were somewhat, but not significantly, higher.

INTRODUCTION

Most professors want to be perceived as being fair. This is generally considered to be a desired end in itself; however, others may want to be seen as fair for more self-serving reasons. This is because the professor who is perceived as being fair is more likely to be positively accepted and have greater influence over his or her students. This is consistent with the work of Tedesch and Melburg (1984) who concluded that managers are likely to have greater influence and power over subordinates when they are perceived as fair. In a broader context, it may also be argued that it is in the best interest of a university to have an image of being fair as it may help attract students, faculty and community support.

It is reasonable to ask "Why be concerned with being perceived to be fair, rather than simply be fair?" The dictionary (Random House American College Dictionary) defines being "fair" as "free from bias, dishonesty or injustice". This appears to be reasonably straightforward. However, Greenberg (1988), in examining the literature on fairness, found that "legal scholars and philosophers cannot agree on what fairness really is in an absolute sense, (therefore) social scientists have relied on justice as it is perceived to be." It is on this basis that our focus is upon perceptions of fairness, rather than the art of being fair. This is also consistent with Greenberg's (1990) approach to the study of organizational justice.

This paper examines what a professor might do to affect perceptions of fairness, with a specific examination of participation and grading. Greenberg (1988), in a study involving 815 managers, identified what they thought would contribute to being perceived as fair. One of the most frequent responses was to allow workers to participate in decisions. In a related area Erez, Earley and Hulin (1985) found that participation facilitated goal acceptance and performance. Acceptance, obviously, is not the same construct as perceived fairness; however, it is reasonable to assume that they should be highly correlated as acceptance seems less likely to occur if the goal, or outcome, is perceived to be unfair.

Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that students who participate in decisions that affect them would perceive the

results as being fairer than those not participating. The focus of this study is the use of participation in the grading of presentations and its impact on the perception of fairness.

METHOD

To test the effect of participation, three classes were given the option to participate in the grading of their colleagues' presentations. They accepted and, in a fourth class used for comparison purposes, nothing was mentioned about participating.

All four classes were in an undergraduate organizational behavior course and were taught by the same professor. Most of the students were in their junior year. Three of the four sections were evening courses, with a mix of full-time and part-time students. The fourth was a daytime class and consisted mainly of full-time students. The class not participating in the grading was one of the three evening classes. There were 32, 24 and 22 students in the participating classes, and 21 students in the non-participating class.

The three classes were told that they were to assess each of the presentations excluding their own, based upon the four criteria specified in the course outline and discussed in class. After all of the presentations each presentation group met and assigned a different letter grade for each of the other presentations. This required them to differentiate their colleagues' performance and ensured a distribution of the grades. The average of their grades counted for 25% of their colleagues' presentation grade.

The professor independently graded the presentations and then recorded and subsequently reviewed with each of the three classes his grades, the average of the students' grades, and the combined grades. In the fourth class, the professor's grades for the presentations were reviewed. They were then asked to individually and anonymously respond to the question "To what extent do you think your group's presentation has been fairly graded?" They were asked to use the following scale: 1-very fairly graded; 2-fairly graded; 3-unfairly graded; 4-very unfairly graded.

In addition to allowing participation in decision making, Greenberg (1988) reported three other responses from the managers he surveyed that were thought to contribute to perceptions of fairness. These are (1) announce all pay raises and promotions, (2) explain how pay raises are determined, and (3) explain why work assignments are made.

These were all incorporated, in an analogous form, in the following ways: (1) the grades for all the group presentations were announced to the class, (2) the criteria for determining the grades were specified in the course outline and reviewed in class, and (3) the rationale for the project and presentation was discussed.

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RESULTS

An analysis of the results showed that there was no significant difference among the three participating classes. The results of these sections were then combined and analyzed against the results of the non-participating class. The results, as shown in Table 1, indicate that the classes that participated in the grading perceived their presentation to be more fairly graded than those in the class that did not participate. The results of the 2-tailed t-test, with variances not pooled, indicate that these results were significant at the 5% level, (p .05).

DISCUSSION

These results occurred even though the students did not participate in grading their own presentation. That is, they graded only their colleagues' presentations. Therefore, it appears that when one's colleagues participate in decisions, which directly affect you, your perceptions of fairness are positively influenced. This may explain why academics generally perceive their collegial evaluation systems positively.

It is interesting to note that the class not participating in the grading happened to have, on average, the highest grades. Thus, these results do not support the idea that giving higher grades results in being perceived as fair. However, the students were not told that their grades were higher. It might be argued that, had the students perceived their grades to be higher, then they would have been more satisfied (although this was not examined) and perceived their grades to be fairer. This might have been the case using the Equity Theory rationale. That is they may have perceived their input (effort and/or performance) to be high. If they perceived their inputs as 'above average', as many people do, then according to Equity Theory, they would seek above average outcomes, and if these were not achieved, they would experience inequity and perceive the outcomes as unfair. This, however, is a separate question i.e., "Do those who perceive their outcomes as higher than others perceive those results as fair and, if so, under what conditions?"

Returning to the discussion of being perceived as fair in the classroom, Greenberg's (1988) finding may be generally applied by:

1. Announcing the distribution and means of all grades (which may be analogous to announcing all pay raises and promotions)
2. Explaining the format and emphasis of the exams as well as the rationale behind each assignment (which may be analogous to explaining why work assignments are

made)

3. Reviewing exams and explaining what the correct answers were, and if appropriate, why, as well as explaining the grade allocations (which may be analogous to explaining how pay raises. i.e., rewards, are determined)
4. Allowing participation in decisions affecting the students. This may be achieved by permitting them to:
 - a) determine point allocations among different components of the course requirements
 - b) divide the group grade amongst the members of their team members
 - c) participate in the grading of their colleagues and/or their own presentations.

In a broader context, it appears that there is support for Greenberg's (1990) concept of organizational justice in the classroom setting. The extension of these ideas, with the empirical support provided in this study, may be helpful to those who want to be perceived as fair. Although most of us act in a manner, which we perceive to be fair, ensuring that others see us that way may require some additional action. Hopefully we are gaining some useful insights as to how to achieve this objective.

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TABLE 1
PERCEIVED FAIRNESS OF PRESENTATION GRADES

	PARTICIPATING CLASSES				NON- PARTICIPATING CLASS
	SECTION CC	SECTION EE	SECTION CA	COMBINED 3 CLASSES	SECTION CB
1 Very Fair	6	2	5	13	3
2 Fair	22	18	11	51	7
3 Very Unfair	6	3	6	15	10
4 Unfair	0	1	0	1	1
Mean Response	2.0	2.125	2.045	2.05	2.428
Average Grade of Presentation	74.0	74.3	72.8	73.7	75.2
t*				2.1*	
p*				.046*	

* 2-tailed t-test, variances not pooled for "Combined 3 Classes" and the "Non-Participating Class"