

Fairness matters in higher education: student classroom justice perceptions and behavioral responses

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Abstract

Fairness in the higher education instructional context, i.e., classroom justice, is fast becoming a salient and widespread concern among scholars, instructors, and students alike. Drawing on research conducted in North America, Europe, Asia, and other world regions, the present article describes university students' beliefs about what constitutes unfair instructor behavior, and it explores the relationships between classroom justice and student behavioral responses. Results of this work indicate that university students identify grading procedures, instructor feedback, and instructor affect, attention, and caring as key factors in determining classroom justice. In addition, university students' perceptions of (un)fairness are associated with student learning, engagement, and antisocial classroom behavior. In short, classroom justice in higher education is integral to student learning and instruction. Classroom justice matters.

Keywords: *Classroom justice; fairness; student-instructor relationships.*

1. Introduction

Whether driven by the neoliberalization of higher education, rapid changes in information and communication technology, or the prevailing student-as-consumer orientation, fairness has become an increasingly salient topic for instructors, administrators, and students (Chory & Horan, 2018, 2022; Chory, Horan, & Houser, 2017; Chory & Offstein, 2017; Chory, Zhaleh, & Estaji, 2022). The study of fairness in the instructional context is known as *classroom justice* (Chory-Assad, 2002). In the present manuscript, the instructional practices and behaviors students perceive to be (un)fair and student responses to (un)fairness are examined, with particular focus on higher education. Findings from the United States of America (USA), where the study of classroom justice began, are discussed, as is burgeoning classroom justice research conducted in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and other regions across the world.

2. What is Classroom Justice?

Classroom justice theory and research were originally grounded in industrial-organizational psychology, organizational behavior, and management theory and research in the USA (see Chory-Assad, 2002; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004). As a theoretical construct, classroom justice consists of three *dimensions* enacted or evaluated according to multiple *principles*, which are applied in various *domains* (Chory et al., 2022; Rasooli, Zandi, & DeLuca, 2019; Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021a, 2021b).

Early classroom justice research focused primarily on the three *dimensions*. *Distributive justice* refers to perceptions of fairness concerning the outcomes (e.g., grades, instructor attention) allocated in the instructional context, whereas *procedural justice* refers to the fairness of the processes (e.g., grading procedures) used to distribute said outcomes (Chory-Assad, 2002; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004). *Interactional justice* is defined as perceptions of the fairness of the instructor's interpersonal treatment of students when processes are executed or outcomes allocated (Chory, 2007).

A recent theoretical development in the realm of classroom justice centers on justice *principles*, i.e., the standards or rules used to judge fairness, and *domains*, i.e., the course elements or contexts in which the principles are applied (Rasooli et al., 2019). Classroom justice may be implemented or violated according to 17 justice principles (Chory et al., 2022; Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021a, 2021b; Rasooli et al., 2019). The domains include assessment, teaching, learning, and interaction, each of which has subdomains (Chory et al., 2017, 2022; Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Horan, Chory, & Goodboy, 2010; Rasooli et al., 2019).

Research on justice principles and domains revealed that university students reported their instructors violated the distributive justice principles of equity (in grading) and equality (in communicating affect) in equal measure (Chory et al., 2022), consistent with prior research

(Chory et al., 2017; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004; Horan et al., 2010; Rasooli, Zandi, & DeLuca, 2018). University students most frequently reported instructor procedural justice violations of the bias suppression principle in the relational communication and student performance domains, followed by violations of accuracy in performance and reasonableness in course workload. Finally, students perceived instructors violated the interactional justice principles of justification in student performance domains and caring and propriety in relational domains (Chory et al., 2022).

3. What Classroom Justice Violations (Unfair Behaviors) Do Students Identify?

College students identify and label a variety of instructor behaviors, events, and practices as unfair. Quantitative research reveals that American university students perceive instructors who are incompetent, unethical, uncaring (Chory, 2007; Chory & Offstein, 2017) and verbally aggressive (Claus, Chory, & Malachowski, 2012) as unfair. They also find instructors who use coercive power (Paulsel, Chory-Assad, & Dunleavy, 2005) and do not effectively answer questions or provide enjoyable interactions (Young, Horan, & Frisby, 2013) to be unfair. Research across the world confirms the aforementioned findings and provides additional insight into the types of instructional behaviors and occurrences that university students believe to be unfair. See Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, university students identify unfair behaviors representing all three justice dimensions and occurring in various domains. Across samples, the most commonly reported justice violations pertain to the distribution of grades and instructor affect, grading procedures, feedback, and the extent to which instructors care about students. Singling students out for criticism, attendance/make-up policies, and not following through on one's word are classroom justice violations that are less commonly identified across groups. Regardless of the particular instance or form of unfairness, however, the perception of classroom justice has been shown to lead to observable and meaningful consequences.

Table 1. University students' reports of classroom injustice (i.e., unfair instructor behaviors).

Distributive Justice Violations (the instructor's distribution of...)

- grades ^{1,3,5}
- opportunities ^{1,3}
- affect or attention ^{1,3,5,6}
- punishment ^{1,3}

Procedural Justice Violations (the instructor or instructor's...)

- class procedures ^{1,3}
- grading procedures ^{1,2,3,5,7}
- course make-up/late/attendance policies ^{1,3}
- course schedule/workload ^{1,3,5}
- not following through ^{1,3}
- not providing students desired information for exams ^{1,3}
- making an error that affects students ^{1,3,5}
- not providing students adequate or timely feedback ^{1,3,4,5,6,7}
- not being available or accessible to students ^{1,3,5}

Interactional Justice Violations (the instructor...)

- was rude/insensitive ^{1,2,3,4,7}
- implied/stated student was stupid ^{1,3}
- made sexist/racist/prejudiced comments ^{1,3}
- singled student out for criticism ^{1,3}
- did not care about students/nonresponsive ^{1,3,4,5,8}
- accused student of wrongdoing ^{1,2,3,7}
- did not explain decisions (i.e., informational injustice) ^{1,3,6}

Sources: ¹Horan et al. (2010), ²Čiuladienė & Račelytė (2016), ³Chory et al. (2017), ⁴Rasooli et al. (2019), ⁵Estaji & Zhalch (2022), ⁶Chory et al. (2022), ⁷Bazvand & Rasooli (2022)

4. Why Does Classroom Justice Matter?

Classroom justice is important because it impacts student learning, classroom climate, and student and instructor well-being. On the positive side, student perceptions of classroom justice tend to enhance learning and student-instructor relational outcomes. College students' perceptions of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice were positively related to motivation, affective learning, and cognitive learning (Chory-Assad, 2002; Holmgren & Bolkan, 2014; Horan, Martin, & Weber, 2012; Vallade, Martin, & Weber, 2014). Fairness perceptions were also associated with students having higher quality leader-member exchange relationships with instructors (Horan, Chory, Carton, Miller, & Raposo, 2013).

In contrast to justice's positive effects, university students' perceptions of injustice are associated with outcomes that threaten the learning environment. For instance, perceived injustice predicted a stronger likelihood that students would engage in indirect interpersonal aggression and hostility toward their instructors and seek revenge on, deceive, and resist instructors (Chory-Assad, 2002; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004; Horan et al., 2013; Paulsel & Chory-Assad, 2005). Perceived instructor injustice was also associated with a stronger likelihood of college students communicating antisocial compliance-gaining messages to instructors (Claus, Chory, & Malachowski, 2012), coming to class under the influence of drugs and alcohol, and communicating aggressively and offensively in the instructor's course. Distributive injustice and instructor unethical out-of-class behavior also interacted to predict university student incivility and offensive communication (Chory & Offstein, 2017).

Departing from quantitative-based research methodology, Horan et al. (2010) and Chory et al. (2017) used open-ended items to investigate college students' behavioral responses to perceived injustice. They observed that the most common behavioral response was dissent, which included complaining about the unfair incident to the instructor, another school authority figure, on teacher evaluations, and to family, friends, and other students. The second most common university student behavioral responses were inaction or acceptance of the unfairness (Horan et al., 2010) and changing one's approach to the course (Chory et al., 2017). These responses were followed by student verbal aggression, hostility, confrontation, and disengagement.

5. Do Classroom Justice Perceptions and Responses Vary by Country?

Since the introduction of classroom justice theory and research in the USA, scholars across the world have contributed to the body of knowledge on fairness in the classroom. Classroom justice has been investigated in Australia (Lizzio, Wilson, & Hadaway, 2007), Italy (DiBattista, Pivetti, & Berti, 2014), Poland (Lankiewicz, 2014), Serbia (Kovačević, Zunić, & Mihailović, 2013), Lithuania (Čiuladienė & Račelytė, 2016), Russia (Bempechat et al., 2013), Turkey (Argon & Kepekcioglu, 2016), Cyprus (Uludag, 2014), Iran (Estaji & Zhaleh, 2021a, 2021b, 2022), China (Tata, 2005; Yan, 2021), Nigeria (Kura, Shamsudina, & Chauhan, 2014), and other countries. In some cases, results are consistent with work in the USA. For example, perceptions of fairness were related to Italian (DiBattista et al., 2014) and Australian (Lizzio et al., 2007) university students' engagement, Serbian college students' achievement (Kovačević et al., 2013), Turkish college students' perceptions of instructor trustworthiness (Argon & Kepekcioglu, 2016), and Chinese university students' perceptions of instructor credibility and immediacy (Yan, 2021). In contrast with US-based work, Nigerian undergraduates' perceptions of procedural justice were not related to deviant behavior or honor codes (Kura et al., 2014).

6. Conclusion

Fairness in the higher education classroom is associated with a number of significant educational experiences and outcomes. University instructors enacting fair procedures tends to enrich college student learning and student-instructor relationships, whereas instructors violating justice expectations tends to harm student achievement and relationships. These are issues that deserve continued attention from those seeking to enhance student learning, as well as student and instructor well-being, in higher education.

In addition, there is a need for classroom justice research in more diverse settings. Future research should examine and compare justice perceptions and responses across countries with different cultural values (e.g., individualistic vs. collectivistic), sociopolitical structures (e.g., democratic, communist, post-socialist) and histories (e.g., colonization). As more and more university faculty and students engage in teaching and learning across borders, this work will grow in significance and utility. Classroom justice matters in higher education and it will continue to do so.

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