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Revisiting the Instrumentality of Voice: Having Voice in the Process Makes People Think They Will Get What They Want

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Abstract

Research on procedural justice has found that processes that allow people voice (i.e., input) are perceived as fairer, and thus elicit more positive reactions, than processes that do not allow people voice. Original theorizing attributed these effects to beliefs that the provision of voice enhances the likelihood of receiving desired outcomes, but subsequent research has generally argued that non-instrumental mechanisms actually underlie reactions to voice. In contrast to past research, we show that giving everyone voice does, in fact, lead them to believe that they are more likely to win a competition. However, this instrumental belief does not account for the effects of voice on perceived fairness. Results suggest that although voice does indeed have important instrumental meaning, this instrumentality does not actually explain why people value having a voice in the process.

Key words: justice, voice, shared circumstance effects, overconfidence

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Manipulating whether people are given a voice in the processes and decisions that affect them is by far the most common procedural element examined in research on the psychology of procedural justice (DeCremer, 2004; van den Bos, 1999). The considerable attention given to voice is primarily due to the potent reactions it elicits. People demonstrate more positive reactions to decisions, decision makers, and other entities represented by procedures when they experience procedures that they regard as procedurally fair (referred to as the *fair process effect*; Blader & Tyler, 2005; Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Blader, 2000) and voice has been shown to be a critical element of those procedural fairness judgments (Thibaut & Walker, 1975; van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt & Wilke, 1997). As such, voice is central to these positive reactions.

The very earliest studies and discussions of voice, including the seminal work by Thibaut and Walker (1975) and Walker, LaTour, Lind, and Thibaut (1974), attributed people's positive reactions to voice to an increase in people's perceptions of their likelihood of receiving outcomes they desire. Their argument emphasized that people value voice because it provides them an opportunity to shape their outcomes in contexts where they lack full control over those outcomes, i.e,. people value voice because they regard it as instrumental to achieving outcomes they desire. Although various research efforts have explored (and questioned) the merits of this explanation (Leung, Tong, & Lind, 2007; Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith & Huo, 1997), previous work has not *directly* assessed the extent to which voice shapes people's expectations that they will receive desired outcomes, thus leaving open questions about whether voice actually has perceived instrumental value. Given the importance of understanding people's reactions to voice,

revisiting the potential instrumentality of voice is critical for understanding the psychology of voice and justice.

Revisiting questions about the instrumentality of voice is also worthwhile because voice effects are now most typically examined in contexts composed of a fixed pie of resources. In such fixed-pie situations, giving everyone voice cannot possibly improve everyone's outcomes (i.e., objectively, voice cannot have instrumental value in such situations, since everyone is given equal opportunity to state their viewpoints). Nevertheless, recent research demonstrates that in situations in which competition is made easier for *all* rivals, people are actually more likely to believe that they will win. Windschitl, Kruger, and Simms (2003) dubbed this a *shared circumstance effect*: On average, people believe that they will do better than others at easy tasks and worse than others at difficult tasks (Kruger, 1999; Moore & Small, 2007). This is an error, of course, because easy tasks are easier for everyone, and thus, an individual's likelihood of winning is not actually enhanced when circumstances that make winning seem more feasible are made available to everyone. Only one runner will win the race, even under the most favorable of conditions. In this paper we ask whether these shared circumstance effects can help explain reactions to voice. Do people value having a voice in the process because they believe that it will make them more influential than others in the final outcome?

The shared circumstance effect and voice

Testing the shared circumstance effects of voice provides an opportunity to examine some fundamental—but untested—assumptions about the psychology of voice. As noted, early procedural justice researchers argued that people value the opportunity presented by voice procedures—and thus regard those procedures as more fair—because such procedures provide them an opportunity to influence their outcomes. This argument is based on the premise that

because most procedures do not allow people full control over their outcomes (i.e., they do not allow *decision control*), people would instead value having at least some influence during the process that determines outcomes (referred to as *process control*). Process control—which has essentially become synonymous with voice—was, in turn, regarded as a key attribute of procedural fairness (i.e., it was believed that processes would be regarded as more fair to the extent that they allowed greater levels of influence over outcomes). In translating these discussions to the language of the shared circumstance effect, we can say that process control, or voice, was essentially described by early procedural justice researchers as enhancing people's sense that prevailing (i.e., receiving the outcomes one desires) was attainable, which in turn led them to regard procedures that allowed for voice as more fair.

However, subsequent research on voice and on the fair process effect has attempted to debunk the notion that the effects of voice on procedural justice judgments—and on reactions to those judgments—are due to voice's instrumental value (Lind, Kanfer & Earley, 1990; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith & Huo, 1997). Various streams of research have argued that the impact of voice on procedural justice cannot be accounted for by people's expectations that voice helps to achieve desired outcomes. This, in turn, has led these studies and researchers to conclude that voice must have *non-instrumental* significance (Lind, Kanfer & Earley, 1990). This non-instrumental value derives from a number of factors, including the positive relational message conveyed by the provision of voice (Tyler & Lind, 1992), the uncertainty reduction function served by voice (van den Bos & Lind, 2002), and voice's ability to meet people's expectations about what constitutes just or moral treatment (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001), among others. While these factors vary in terms of how they describe the non-instrumental bases of voice and process fairness, each of these approaches incorporates the now widely-accepted

understanding that the impact of voice on people's justice judgments and their more general reactions cannot be explained by an instrumental interpretation of why voice matters.

Adopting a shared circumstance approach to the issue of voice, however, highlights a fundamental gap in research that challenges the instrumental explanation of voice effects. In particular, although the essence of an instrumental understanding of voice is that voice procedures enhance people's beliefs that they will prevail in achieving outcomes they desire, to the best of our knowledge no research has directly assessed these beliefs. That is, no studies we know of have examined whether or not giving everyone a voice in the allocation of scarce resources actually increases their belief that the final allocation will favor them. As a result, no studies have sufficiently examined whether such outcome expectations explain the effects of voice on either perceived process fairness or on people's more general reactions. Instead, studies have used less direct approaches, such as creating experimental conditions that manipulate the viability of an instrumental influence (e.g., providing voice either before or after a decision has ostensibly been made; Lind, Kanfer, & Earley, 1990) or statistically mapping a variety of procedural elements (voice, neutrality, consistency, treatment with respect, etc.)[1] on to people's overall justice judgments in order to examine which elements have a significant influence when all are considered simultaneously (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1989; Tyler & Blader, 2000; Tyler, Degoey & Smith, 1996).

While these and other approaches are certainly informative, it is striking that no research has adopted a more straightforward approach—that of varying whether people have voice and then asking them to report their perceived likelihood of achieving a favorable outcome. The absence of such evidence is problematic because it suggests that research on the

[1] It is noteworthy that studies adopting this approach do not typically assess perceived influence over outcomes one desires. Instead, they assess the presence of voice as a procedural element and then use this assessment as a proxy for these judgments.

(non)instrumentality of voice may not have adequately examined the issue. For instance, current research has not determined whether findings on the noninstrumentality of voice are best understood as indicating that (a) voice does not actually affect people's sense that they can impact their outcomes (and thus, a shared circumstance analysis of voice is not appropriate), or (b) voice does impact perceived influence over outcomes, yet this does not explain why people value voice. In other words, it remains unclear whether prior research findings regarding the instrumentality of voice are due to (a) people generally seeing little instrumental value in voice procedures in the first place, or (b) people not caring about the instrumental value of voice procedures as much as they care about the other, non-instrumental implications of voice. This highlights that some old questions from research on the psychology of justice could benefit from some new, more direct approaches.

In the study we present, we address this shortcoming and use a shared-circumstance approach to examine the influence of voice on people's expectations about the outcomes they will receive. In so doing, we hope to clarify a number of questions about instrumentality and voice. First and foremost, we will examine whether voice actually shapes people's expectations that they will receive outcomes they desire. If so, we hope to determine whether or not these outcome expectations explain why voice is such an influential element in assessments of process fairness. Furthermore, we hope to learn whether or not these outcome expectations account for the impact of voice on people's more general reactions to procedures.

Method

Participants in our experiment took part in a creativity contest. Some of them were given voice—in the form of an opportunity to explain why their work was more creative than others'—while others were denied this opportunity. The primary dependent measures were

(a) expectations about the outcome—in this case, having their ideas selected as being among the more creative, (b) perceived process fairness, and (c) general reactions to their experience (i.e., reactions to the experimenter and the experiment itself).

Participants. Participants were 129 undergraduate students at Carnegie Mellon University who participated in exchange for course credit.

Procedure. When participants arrived, they were told that the study was examining the effect of competition on creativity and that they would all engage in a creative task and then have their creativity evaluated. Participants were also told that the half of those present—those judged as more creative—would win a five dollar prize. The other half of the participants would win nothing.

Next, they took the test, in which they were given five minutes to write down as many uses as they could think of for a cardboard box. After they had finished writing down their ideas, participants were told, "…since creativity is such a complex phenomenon to evaluate, research has shown that it's often useful when judging someone's creativity to try and understand their thought processes. Therefore, we normally ask participants to explain how they went about working on these tasks and why they think their answers should be considered creative."

Participants in the voice condition were further told, "In other words, we are going to ask you to use this form to provide your input about why your ideas should be judged as more creative than others'." Participants in the no-voice condition were instead told, "However, we've decided that we are going to skip that part because we'd like to ask you to use the time we have in today's session to work on something else. So, rather than providing input about why your ideas should be judged as more creative than others, we are going to ask you to instead tell us

about your hometown." We used this approach to ensure that the voice/no voice distinction was explicit (van den Bos, 1999).

After participants took another four minutes to complete this writing assignment, one experimenter collected their written materials and ostensibly took them away to grade them. A second experimenter administered the post-test questionnaire, which contained all the manipulation checks and dependent measures. At the end of the experiment, participants were informed that we had not actually graded their creativity tests and that they would all receive the five dollar prize. Participants were then debriefed, paid, thanked, and dismissed.

Measures

Manipulation checks. The voice manipulation check consisted of a one-item measure asking respondents whether they were given a chance to explain their work and make a case for why it was creative (yes/no).

Expectations of winning the prize. Five items assessed participants' judgments that they were likely to have their performance selected as the most creative. Those items were: (1) How high a score do you think the judge will give you on the creativity task? (1 to 8), (2) What do you think the probability is that you will win the prize? (0% to 100%), (3) Please estimate the percentage of other participants in this experiment that will have creativity scores lower than yours (0% to 100%), (4) How certain are you that the judge will select your work as among the most creative? (1 to 8), and (5) How confident are you that the judge will find in your favor? (1 to 8).

Responses to each item were standardized prior to combining them into an aggregate measure. This five-item measure had strong reliability (α =.90).

Procedural justice. Four items assessed participants' procedural justice judgments. These items were designed to tap into both decision making and treatment aspects of procedural justice (Blader & Tyler, 2003). They included: (1) How fairly would you say you were treated in today's session? (2) Do you feel that your work on today's creativity task is going to be evaluated fairly? (3) Did you feel that you were treated appropriately in today's session? and (4) How respected did today's session make you feel? All items were answered using eight-point rating scales. This scale demonstrated good reliability (α =.80).

General reactions to the experience. Seven items assessed participants' reactions to their experience. Those items were: (1) What are your feelings toward the experimenter? (2) How much do you like the experimenter? (3) Do you think the experimenter did a good job running today's session? (4) Would you recommend to your friends that they participate in this study? (5) Would you be willing to participate in another study exactly like this one? (6) How much did you enjoy participating in this session? and (7) If you were to participate in another session like today's, how much effort would you put into the task? All responses were using eight-point scales. This measure demonstrated good reliability (α =.87).

Results

Means, standard deviations, and the interscale correlation matrix are presented in Table 1.

Manipulation check. All of the 75 participants in the voice condition (100%) answered "yes" to the voice manipulation check, whereas only 3 of 54 participants in the no voice condition (6%) answered in the affirmative. This difference is significant, χ^2 (1) = 117, $p < .001$, and suggests that the manipulation was effective.

Does voice shape the expectations of winning the prize? A one-way analysis of variance was used to test the prediction that participants' perceived likelihood of winning the prize for

most creative input would be significantly shaped by whether or not they received a voice opportunity. The results confirmed this prediction, insofar as those receiving voice were significantly more likely to expect that they would win (M_z = .21) than those who did not receive voice (M_z = -.29), F (1, 127) = 12.71, p< .001, η^2 = .09. This result confirms a key, but previously untested premise of instrumental theories of procedural justice. It is furthermore consistent with a shared circumstances analysis of voice.

Do expectations of winning the prize account for the effects of voice on procedural justice judgments? Next, we explored the question of whether or not the effects of voice on people's procedural justice judgments are explained (i.e., mediated) by the impact voice has on expectations of winning the prize—as would be predicted by instrumental theories of procedural justice. In order to test this, we first examined whether voice actually affected procedural justice judgments—as would be expected based on the long history of procedural justice findings that identify voice as a key element of process fairness. As expected, those receiving voice were significantly more likely to evaluate processes as fair (M = 6.88) than were those who did not receive voice (M = 6.48), F (1, 127) = 4.24, p < .05, η^2 = .032.

We then conducted a series of regression analyses (Baron & Kenny, 1986) to determine whether this effect is mediated by participants' expectations of whether or not they would win. These analyses revealed that although the results met two prerequisites for testing mediation—as shown above, voice had a significant influence on both procedural justice (the main effect) expectations of winning (the mediator), the data did not satisfy the third prerequisite. In particular, expectations of winning were unrelated to procedural justice judgments (β = .02, ns). This indicates that such expectations do not mediate the effect of voice on procedural justice

judgments and suggests that expectations of winning *do not* explain why voice leads to more positive assessments of procedural justice.

Do expectations of winning the prize account for the effects of voice on general reactions? Next, we tested whether or not expectations of winning explained the effects of voice on participants' general reactions. To examine this, we first explored whether or not there was a main effect of voice on general reactions. Results indicated that the provision of voice (vs. no voice) did in fact lead to more positive reactions (F (1, 127) = 5.38, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .04$; low voice $M = 5.42$; high voice $M = 5.89$). However, as was the case with procedural justice judgments, expectations of winning were not significantly related to general reactions ($\beta = .11$, ns). Once again, the mediator was unrelated to the outcome variable, which seems to indicate that expectations of winning do not explain the impact of voice on general reactions to the experience. This again confirms our prediction (which was based on non-instrumental models of voice) that expectations of winning do not explain voice's impact on people's general reactions.

Do procedural justice judgments account for the effect of voice on general reactions? We conducted an additional analysis to determine whether or not the effects of voice on general reactions were due to the implications of voice on participants' procedural justice judgments. Given that expectations of winning did not mediate these effects, we conducted this analysis in an attempt to gain insight into why voice actually *did* impact reactions. In particular, we sought to verify whether or not, as procedural justice research would suggest, voice shaped people's reactions *because* people regard voice procedures as more fair than no-voice procedures. The results of these mediation tests confirmed that the effects of voice are fully mediated by participants' procedural justice perceptions. As shown above, voice was significantly related to general reactions and to procedural justice. Furthermore, procedural justice was significantly

related to general reactions (β = .56, p < .001, *adj* R^2 = 33%), and thus, all conditions for testing mediation were satisfied in the data. Most importantly, the significant effect of voice on reactions (β = .20, p < .05) became non-significant (β = .10, ns) when procedural justice judgments were included in the analysis (Sobel z = 2.03, p < .05). Therefore, as the procedural justice literature suggests, people's reactions to voice procedures can best be understood by focusing on the implications of voice for people's justice judgments.

Discussion

The results of this study make an important contribution to our understanding of the psychology of voice. They confirm that voice shares important features with other factors that prompt the shared circumstance bias. In particular, providing people voice leads to enhanced perceptions on their part that they will be able to attain outcomes they desire—it makes these outcomes seem easier to attain. Of course, when voice procedures are consistently implemented across people (as they were in this study, and as they often are in life), it is an error for all people to believe that voice enhances their chances of winning. The significance of this finding should not be underestimated, as it confirms an assumption underlying the instrumental models of procedural justice that has gone untested (to the best of our knowledge) in the more than three decades since those models were first developed. Namely, it provides evidence that voice does indeed have perceived instrumental value. Previous research did not explicitly consider this, and thus, the current results represent an important contribution to our understanding of the interface of instrumentality and voice.

While confirming the instrumental model's argument that voice has instrumental value, the results of this study make an equally important contribution by showing that voice's instrumental value does not explain its impact on procedural justice judgments or on people's

reactions. In this regard, the results confirm the non-instrumental approaches to procedural justice, which argue that fair process effects are not due to people's concerns about receiving outcomes they desire. Voice procedures are not regarded as fair procedures simply because they help people attain outcomes they value. Moreover, our results suggest that procedural justice judgments are not simply assessments of the extent to which procedures seem likely to produce the outcomes people desire. The potent reactions to the experience elicited by voice appear to be linked to people's concern with process fairness (indeed, they are explained by this concern) and *not* with concerns they may have over the outcomes they receive.

However, it is important that our study not simply be seen as further confirmation of the importance of the non-instrumental models of procedural justice. The finding that outcome expectations (which were shaped by voice) did not influence people's reactions should not be interpreted as meaning that these reactions have no impact. Instead, it suggests that researchers may find it worthwhile to explore variables that *are* shaped by outcome expectations. For instance, self-efficacy judgments could vary as a function of whether people attain outcomes that are the target of their strivings. Similarly, decisions about how much to invest in a group or a course of action, and decisions about whether to remain with a group, may likewise be shaped by outcome expectations. In general, researchers should look to other variables that are likely to have linkages to outcome expectations, and should examine whether or not the effects of voice on these other variables can be explained by people's outcome expectations. It may well be the case that both instrumental and non-instrumental models for procedural justice provide valid explanations for fair process effects, but that their applicability depends on the dependent variable in question.

As a whole, the results of our study provide important clarification of previous work on instrumentality and voice. They simultaneously support the instrumental argument that voice enhances the perceived attainability of desired outcomes, as well as the generally-accepted perspective that instrumentality concerns do not explain the psychology of voice. Our findings also suggest some potential new directions for research. As such, they help integrate these two perspectives in a novel, but important way that adds new insight to old questions about the interface of voice and instrumentality (Lind & Tyler, 1988).

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Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and interscale correlation matrix.

	Mean	Std dev	1	2	3
1 Expectations of winning	.00	0.85	--		
2 Procedural justice	6.71	1.10	.02	--	
3 General reactions	5.69	1.13	.11	.58	--

n = 129.