

Parents' Reactions to Child Day Care Organizations: The Influence of Perceptions of Procedures and the Role of Organizations' Trustworthiness

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On the basis of the uncertainty management model, we argue here that when people are uncertain about an organization's trustworthiness, they may resolve the question how they should react toward the organization by relying on their perceptions of the organization's procedures. As a consequence, we predicted that the reactions of parents whose child was in a day care center would be strongly influenced by their perceptions of the procedures used by the organization that was responsible for their children's day care when the parents would be uncertain about the organization's trustworthiness. However, when parents would be certain that the organization could be trusted they would be less in need of procedural information, yielding less strong effects of perceived procedure on parents' reactions. The findings of a survey study corroborate this line of reasoning. In the discussion it is argued that these findings suggest that people especially rely on their perceptions of procedures when they are uncertain about important aspects of their lives, such as the trustworthiness of organizations that are responsible for their children's day care.

KEY WORDS: procedural justice; trust; child day care; uncertainty.

When people are interacting with authorities and organizations, they frequently are faced with the fact that they have to cede authority and subsume to the power of these persons and social institutions (Lind, 1995). Because ceding authority and subsuming to power raises the possibility of exploitation and exclusion,

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people may feel uncertain and uneasy about their relationship with authorities (Van den Bos and Lind, in press) and about how to react to organizations (Lind and Van den Bos, 2001). People may, therefore, ask themselves whether the authorities and organizations can be trusted not to exploit or exclude them and hence want to have information about authorities' and organizations' trustworthiness (Van den Bos *et al.*, 1998). Information about trustworthiness may thus be a strong determinant of people's reactions to authorities and organizations.

In the current paper, we will explore people's reactions to an organization that was very important for them: We will present findings of a survey study in which parents were interviewed about an organization that was responsible for the day care of one or more of their children. There are at least three reasons why this is important.

The first reason is that the issue of children's day care is becoming increasingly important in our society; one of the causes being that it is more and more the case that both parents are holding employed positions. Organizations that are responsible for children's day care thus serve a crucial role in our modern world. Research has been conducted on how parents or other people react to child day care (e.g., Biel *et al.*, 1996), but, surprisingly, there has been, according to our knowledge, little or no research on how parents react to organizations that are responsible for their children's day care. In the present contribution we will try to fill this void. Because it has been suggested that people who experience procedural fairness are more likely to react positively toward authorities and organizations (e.g., Lind and Tyler, 1988; Tyler *et al.*, 1997; Tyler and Lind, 1992), we will explore conditions under which parents' procedural perceptions contribute to promoting positive judgments about the children's day care organization.

The second reason for focusing on parents' reactions to children's day care organizations is that it seems reasonable to argue that the above-mentioned issues of ceding authority and subsuming to power are especially important when parents submit their child to an organization for day care. After all, parents have less control over what happens to their children when these vulnerable beloved human beings are in a day care center. This would suggest, on the basis of what was noted at the beginning of this paper, that information about the organization's trustworthiness should play a special role in parents' reactions toward the organization.

The third reason is that previous studies on the influence of information about trustworthiness and procedures were experimental studies (Van den Bos *et al.*, 1998). Results of these experiments—one scenario experiment and one true, experiential experiment—suggest that people's reactions to an outcome they received from an authority are strongly affected by procedure information when they are uncertain about whether the authority can be trusted and are not or only weakly affected by procedure information when they are certain that the authority can or cannot be trusted. However, as noted by Van den Bos *et al.*, care must be

taken in applying these experimental results to real-world settings. In the current paper, therefore, we will try to further insights about the importance of information about trustworthiness and procedures by investigating people's reactions to an organization that was very important to them in real life.

In the present paper, we will investigate parents' reactions toward their children's day care organization and we will focus on the combined influence that parents' perceived certainty about the organization's trustworthiness and their perceptions of the organization's procedures may have on these reactions. We will base our line of reasoning on a recently developed model in the domain of social justice research, the uncertainty management model (for elaborate overviews of this model, see Lind and Van den Bos, 2001; Van den Bos, 2001a; Van den Bos and Lind, in press).

The uncertainty management model is based on earlier work on fairness heuristic theory (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos, 2001b; Van den Bos *et al.*, 2001), the group-value model (Lind and Tyler, 1988), and the relational model (Tyler and Lind, 1992). On the basis of these earlier accounts, the model tries to explain, among other things, when and why procedural fairness is important for people. A starting point for such an investigation may be the above-mentioned notion that frequently people may ask themselves whether the organizations they are interacting with can be trusted (Lind and Van den Bos, 2001; Van den Bos *et al.*, 1998). This suggests that when parents are dealing with an organization that is responsible for their children's day care, they want to have information about the organization's trustworthiness.

However, we may also ask ourselves: Do people often have such direct information about trust? Van den Bos *et al.* (1998) suggested that people frequently have not. It is further proposed that if people are uncertain about the organization's trustworthiness, they still are interested in trying to find out how to interpret the organization's actions and how to respond to the organization. How do they do this? Following Van den Bos *et al.*, we suggest here that when parents are uncertain about the organization's trustworthiness they refer to the organization's procedures to decide how to respond to the organization that is responsible for their children's day care. We therefore propose that when parents indicate that they are uncertain about the organization's trustworthiness, their reactions toward the organization are strongly influenced by their perceptions of the organization's procedures.

On the other hand, the above-present line of thought also suggests that when parents are more certain about the organization's trustworthiness, they are less in need of procedural perceptions. We therefore expect that when parents are *uncertain* about organization's trustworthiness, their reactions toward the organization are affected by their perceptions of the organization's procedures, but that less strong procedure effects will be found when parents are more certain that the organization can be trusted.

METHOD

Three hundred and fifty parents who had one or more children in a day care center in Leiden, The Netherlands, were asked to complete a questionnaire about the organization which is responsible for children's day care in Leiden.⁵ Two hundred and seventeen parents (62%) returned the questionnaire. Respondents' ratings were measured on 7-point scales, with labels provided for the anchors and mid-points of the scales. As an indication of perceived trust information, respondents were asked whether they thought they could trust the organization (1 = definitely cannot, 4 = do not know, 7 = definitely can). We obtained a measure of perceived procedure by asking respondents how they judged the way in which their child had received a place in the children's care center (1 = very bad, 4 = not good and not bad, 7 = very good). As an indication of respondents' judgments about the organization, we asked them how reliable they judged the organization (1 = very unreliable, 4 = not reliable and not unreliable, 7 = very reliable).

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

We first present the results of preliminary analyses that were conducted to get some first understanding of the data that are presented here. After this, we discuss the findings of our main analyses that were performed to directly test our hypothesis. Table I reports the overall means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations between respondents' perceptions of the organization's trustworthiness, their procedural perceptions, and their organization's reliability judgments.

The hypothesis that we are putting forward in this paper predicts a curvilinear effect such that we expect the strongest influence of procedure perceptions on organizational reliability judgments when respondents had indicated that they did not know whether they could trust the organization. To get a first indication of this hypothesis, we conducted a curvilinear analysis using respondents' centered (Aiken and West, 1991) continuous perceptions of organization's trustworthiness and procedure to predict their organizational reliability judgments. This analysis indeed revealed the expected quadratic effect, $\beta = -3.56$, $p < 0.001$.

After finding this initial support for our hypothesis, we inspected respondents' perceptions of organization's trustworthiness. One hundred and forty-six respondents were positive about the organization's trustworthiness (23 of those were very positive about the organization's trustworthiness, 70 respondents were positive, and 53 persons were somewhat positive). Forty-five respondents did not know whether or not they could trust the organization. Only 19 respondents were

⁵The organization allowed us to only assess some questions that are relevant for the present paper and we were not allowed to ask for demographic data.

Table I. Overall Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Perceptions of Organization’s Trustworthiness, Procedural Perceptions, and Organizational Reliability Judgments

| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|-----------------------------------|----------|-----------|------|------|---|
| 1. Organization’s trustworthiness | 5.1 | 1.3 | — | | |
| 2. Procedural perceptions | 5.5 | 1.6 | 0.37 | — | |
| 3. Organizational reliability | 5.4 | 1.2 | 0.73 | 0.42 | — |

Note. Means are on 7-point scales, with higher values indicating more positive ratings of the variable in question. All correlations: $p < 0.001$.

negative about the organization’s trustworthiness (3 of those were very negative about the organization’s trustworthiness, 5 respondents were negative, and 11 persons were moderately negative). (From 7 respondents, answers were missing.) Because of the small number of respondents with negative trust judgments, we disregarded these respondents in the main analyses presented below.

Excluding the respondents with negative trust judgments ($n = 19$), we performed a curvilinear analysis using respondents’ continuous perceptions of organization’s trustworthiness and procedure to predict their organizational reliability judgments. This analysis again yielded the expected quadratic effect, $\beta = -2.56$, $p < 0.001$.

To obtain further evidence for our hypothesis, we then used a median split of the procedure perceptions to classify respondents as perceiving the organization’s procedure as more versus less positive (Median = 6.0; respondents scoring 6.0 were classified to be positive about the procedure), and we subjected the resulting variable—in combination with the four-level trust variable (unknown vs. moderately positive vs. positive vs. very positive)—to a 2×4 analysis of variance (ANOVA).⁶ As expected, this yielded main effects of procedure, $F(1, 161) = 9.87$, $p < 0.01$, and the trust variable, $F(3, 161) = 35.09$, $p < 0.001$; effects that were qualified by the predicted interaction effect, $F(3, 161) = 6.47$, $p < 0.001$. More important, a trend analysis using 2×4 ANOVA yielded the expected quadratic effect, $F(1, 165) = 16.56$, $p < 0.001$.

After thus having obtained initial support for our hypothesis, we then set out to test our hypothesis more precisely. Recall that our hypothesis made a sharp distinction between the effects of procedure in conditions in which people do not know organizations’ trustworthiness and in situations in which people do have at least some information about organizations’ trustworthiness. In our main analyses, therefore, we collapsed respondents who were very positive, positive, or moderately positive about the organization’s trustworthiness and compared this group of respondents with the group which did not know whether or not they could trust the organization.

⁶It can be noted, by the way, that in this analysis standard deviations ranged from 0.5 to 0.9 and did not differ across conditions. Further details about the data reported here are available on request.

Main Analyses

Our hypothesis predicted that variations in procedure would exert stronger effects among people who had indicated that they did not know whether or not they could trust the organization than among people who stated that they knew they could trust the organization. To test this interaction hypothesis, we first performed a regression analysis, with respondents' centered (Aiken and West, 1991) procedural perceptions, the trust variable (dummy coded), and the interaction effect between these two variables serving as independent variables. As expected, the regression analysis yielded main effects of procedure, $\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$, and trust, $\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$; effects that were qualified by the predicted interaction effect, $\beta = -0.16$, $p < 0.02$. In correspondence with our hypothesis, follow-up analyses revealed stronger effects of perceived procedure on judgments of organizational reliability among respondents who did not know whether they could trust the organization than among those who trusted the organization. In fact, strong, significant effects of procedural perceptions on reliability judgments were found among respondents who did not know whether they could trust the organization, $\beta = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$, and weak, statistically not significant effects were found among those who trusted the organization, $\beta = 0.16$, n.s.

To obtain further evidence for our hypothesis, we then used the median split of the procedure perceptions to classify respondents as perceiving the organization's procedure as more versus less positive, and we subjected the resulting variable—in combination with the dummy-coded trust variable (trust unknown vs. known)—to a 2×2 ANOVA. First of all, results of this analysis revealed that the homogeneity of variance assumption was met (Bartlett-Box $F = 0.50$, $p > 0.68$). Moreover, the results yielded main effects of procedure, $F(1, 165) = 21.22$, $p < 0.001$, and trust, $F(1, 165) = 64.58$, $p < 0.001$; effects that were qualified by the predicted interaction effect, $F(1, 165) = 13.60$, $p < 0.001$. Means and standard deviations are shown in Table II. To find out whether the pattern of means was as predicted by our hypothesis, we wanted to conduct a Tukey procedure for multiple comparisons

Table II. Mean Organizational Reliability Judgments and Standard Deviations as a Function of Procedure and Knowledge About Organization's Trustworthiness

| Procedure | Trust | | | |
|-----------|------------------|-----|--------------------|-----|
| | Unknown | | Positive | |
| | <i>M</i> | SD | <i>M</i> | SD |
| Good | 5.3 _b | 0.8 | 5.9 _a | 0.8 |
| Poor | 4.1 _c | 0.9 | 5.8 _{a,b} | 0.7 |

Note. Means are on 7-point scales, with higher values indicating more positive ratings of the organization's reliability. Means with no subscripts in common differ significantly, as indicated by a Tukey-Kramer test for multiple comparisons between means ($p < 0.05$).

between means with the six cells of our design serving as the independent variable. If the findings of this test would be in correspondence with our predictions this would reveal strong evidence for our hypothesis. As Stevens (1990) has noted, Tukey tests are robust against unequal group sizes, provided that the homogeneity of variance assumption is met (which, as we already noted, was met in our data) and that n is replaced by the harmonic mean for each pair of groups (when this replacement is made, a Tukey test is called the Tukey–Kramer procedure). Results of a Tukey–Kramer procedure ($p < 0.05$) are presented in Table II and showed that respondents who did not know whether or not they could trust the organization, judged the organization to be significantly more reliable when they perceived the organization's procedures as positive than when they were less positive about the organization's procedures. However, respondents' reliability perceptions were not significantly affected by the organization's procedures when they had indicated that they knew that they could trust the organization. This revealed corroborative evidence for our hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study corroborate and extend the laboratory results of Van den Bos *et al.* (1998), and indicate that if people are not certain about an organization's trustworthiness, they refer to their perceptions of the organization's procedures to decide how to react toward the organization, but that when people are certain that the organization is to be trusted, they need their perceptions of the organization's procedures to a lesser extent, and therefore less strong procedure effects are found on the reactions of these people. The results of this study are not only in correspondence with those of Van den Bos *et al.*, but also expand the line of reasoning of these authors to an important domain of real life. Future research should investigate other domains of social and organizational behavior, and may especially want to focus on conducting quasi-experimental research (see Judd and Kenny, 1981) to find out whether and to what extent the effects reported in this paper occur in other real-world situations, but we think that the combination of lab-experimental and real-world correlational research that is presented in the package of studies provided by the Van den Bos *et al.* experiments and the current survey provides a substantial increase in our knowledge when process information promotes positive reactions toward authorities (cf. Van den Bos *et al.*, 1998) and organizations (cf. the current research).

Not surprisingly, only few parents were negative about the trustworthiness of the organization that was responsible for their children's day care. Because of this small number of parents with negative trust judgments, we had to disregard these respondents in our main analyses. Research findings by Van den Bos *et al.* (1998), however, suggest that people who are certain that an authority is *not* to be trusted are similar to persons who are certain that the authority is to be trusted in that

both groups of individuals are less likely to be influenced by procedural justice considerations than are people who are uncertain whether or not the authority is trustworthy. This may suggest that although negative judgments of an organization's trustworthiness may occur less frequently in everyday life than positive trust judgments, both types of judgments may moderate the relationship between people's perceptions of procedure and reactions toward organizations. All this said, however, we would applaud research among a population of parents who are still in the process of deciding whether or not to give their child to a day care institution. Conducting studies with this population may lead to a bigger group of parents who do not have trust information about the organization and perhaps also increase the number of respondents with somewhat negative perceptions of the organization's trustworthiness.

Although parents' reactions toward the child day care organization were clearly influenced by the Predicted Process \times Trustworthiness interaction effect, it should be noted here that overall mean reactions, as assessed by parents' reliability judgments, were quite positive. This may have been caused, among other things, by the fact that the present population of parents already had decided to put their children in the day care organization and by the particular type of reactions that were studied here (organizational reliability judgments). Although it is our impression that our respondents associated psychological meaning to trustworthiness, procedure, and organizational reliability in ways that we intended, future research may want to use multiple-item scales to measure these concepts, may want to incorporate other research populations, and may want to solicit other reactions toward organizations (for an overview of reactions, see, e.g., Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997; Folger and Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg and Lind, 2000).

As mentioned in Footnote 5, we were only allowed to measure some variables in our questionnaire, and because it has been suggested that it may be easier for people to indicate judgments of favorability than judgments of justice or fairness (Van den Bos *et al.*, submitted; cf. Messick and Sentis, 1983; Zajonc, 1980), we decided to assess parents' judgments of procedural favorability rather than procedural justice or fairness. Future research may want to assess respondents' perceptions of procedural justice and fairness as well.

Future research is also needed to explore other operationalizations of certainty about organization's trustworthiness. Although the uncertainty management framework makes a sharp distinction between situations in which people feel they are uncertain about important justice-related issues versus conditions under which people indicate that they are certain about these issues (Van den Bos, 2001a; Van den Bos and Lind, in press), and although our findings are in correspondence with this framework's predictions, we would clearly welcome research studies that explore to what extent it is valid to make such a sharp distinction between people being either uncertain versus certain or that, perhaps, it makes more sense to use less clear-cut distinctions. Furthermore, we would applaud

future research that examines whether scoring on the scale midpoint with the verbal anchor "do not know whether I can trust the organization" reliably assesses people's feelings of uncertainty. It is our hope that the research reported in the current paper, together with the operationalizations used in the Van den Bos *et al.* (1998) studies, may provide an impetus to directly start investigating the role of information about trustworthiness and procedure in other important real-life situations. As research accumulates concerning the limiting conditions of procedure effects, as it has in this study and in other studies (e.g., Folger *et al.*, 1979; Huo *et al.*, 1996; Van den Bos *et al.*, 1997), we begin to understand not only when process effects disappear, but also a great deal about why they occur at all and why they can be so potent when they do occur. This knowledge in turn promises to advance our understanding of fundamental issues in the social psychology of procedural justice and of the role of process-related phenomena in basic social relations.

Previous studies on trust and procedural justice tended to focus on the influence of trust valence (positive vs. negative) on people's reactions to justice-related issues (for overviews, see, e.g., Brockner *et al.*, 1997; Brockner and Siegel, 1996). Together with the Van den Bos *et al.* (1998) paper, the present paper is the first to explore the role of people's certainty about trustworthiness: Van den Bos *et al.* focused on the role of certainty about authority's trustworthiness in laboratory settings and the current study investigated the role of certainty about organization's trustworthiness in a pivotal real-life situation. The present findings suggest that people especially rely on their perceptions of procedures when they are uncertain about important aspects of their lives, such as the trustworthiness of organizations that are responsible for their children's day care.

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