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## **Framing Justice: Using the Concept of Procedural Justice to Advance Political Communication Research**

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*Efforts aimed at increasing civic-mindedness must consider both what encourages and what discourages political engagement. Procedural justice argues that individuals care about the fairness of decision-making or deliberative procedures beyond whether the outcome of any future decision goes in their preferred direction. In turn, perceptions of procedural fairness influence participant satisfaction, commitment to the organization, perceived legitimacy of authorities, and willingness to volunteer on an organization's behalf. The concept of procedural justice holds significant promise for addressing questions in political communication research, particularly those examining the impacts of public engagement. Thus, we offer a synthesis of procedural justice research to support a model for studying procedural justice as a type of framing to which individuals are exposed during participation in civic life and, in so doing, try to make more explicit the previously implicit communicative aspects of procedural justice.*

Despite an unprecedented growth of legislation guaranteeing citizens a voice in public policy making (Langton, 1978), some evidence suggests that Americans' desire to engage in such matters is diminishing (Putnam, 2000). Explanations for this trend, also described as a decline in the public sphere (Boggs, 1997), often focus on incentives to participate. In other words, why do citizens participate, or its corollary, why do they choose *not* to participate? Apart from the more obvious rational choice incentives, such as getting an outcome one desires, research has suggested that procedural considerations may influence an individual's decision to engage politically. In particular, significant attention has been devoted to the concept of procedural justice, which argues that when

faced with authority (e.g., judges, police, supervisors, professors, politicians), individuals care about the fairness or justness of the decision-making procedures to which they are subjected (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Accordingly, when individuals view the procedures as fair, they tend to be more satisfied with the procedures (Thibaut & Walker, 1975) and with those enforcing them (Colquitt, 2001; Lauber & Knuth, 1999; Phillips, 2002; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). They also tend to be more willing to accept outcomes of the process (Tyler, 1994; Weiner, Alexander, & Shortell, 2002)—at times, even when they do not get the outcomes they desire (Tyler & Folger, 1980).

Understanding how procedural justice considerations influence an individual's willingness to engage in future political activities is also key. In particular, efforts to sustain or promote increased participation in political discussion or decision making—whether by voting, signing a petition, or attending a public meeting—must consider not only what motivates individuals to engage but also what encourages or discourages them from participating, including the affective consequences of such participation. Procedural justice research offers some foundation for examining these questions. Specifically, research has shown that when individuals perceive decision-making procedures as unfair, they express less commitment to the organization administering them (Colquitt, 2001; Fuller & Hester, 2001; McFarlin & Sweeney) and a less willingness to engage in voluntary actions on the organization's behalf (Colquitt, 2001; Tyler, DeGoey, & Smith, 1996). For example, if an individual attended a local school board public hearing during which he or she believed citizens' concerns were devalued or ignored, the experience might lead to feelings of dissatisfaction, which could, in turn, decrease that individual's willingness to take part in future school board or other policy-making meetings.

Despite significant testing and elaboration in social psychology, legal studies, and management, procedural justice has received little attention in communication research. In addition, although communication plays an underlying role in the conceptualization of procedural justice, research to date has not explicitly delineated this role, nor has it addressed how messages can influence procedural justice judgments. Our intent is to elucidate connections between communication and procedural justice and, further, to demonstrate how procedural justice research can provide theoretical and empirical depth to discussions about the relationship between opportunities for public engagement (e.g., public meetings/hearings or more elaborate consultative or deliberative forums) and postengagement attitudes and behavior. Specifically, we propose a model that demonstrates how interactions that occur during public engage-

ment efforts, whether experienced directly or via the mass media, can influence individuals' perceptions of procedural justice, which in turn may have affective and behavioral consequences. Methodologically, we argue that it is possible to explore these interactions by thinking of them as opportunities during which authorities can frame themselves and their actions as procedurally just.

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## **Overview of Procedural Justice**

### **Research**

Most procedural justice research assigns only a supporting role to communication; however, the messages authorities send, both verbally and nonverbally, arguably play a fundamental part in the formation of justice judgments. The next few paragraphs provide the requisite background to support our claims and advance our proposed framing model of procedural justice.

### **The Instrumental or “Control” Model**

Scholars credit Thibaut and Walker (1975, 1978) with initiating contemporary research on procedural justice (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2000; Lind & Tyler, 1988). Like much of the later work in the field, Thibaut and Walker (1975) reported a series of experiments and scenario studies involving various situations of legal conflict and various manipulations of decision control. Their research found that participants were more satisfied with the process when they perceived it as fair. This effect, however, was shown to occur primarily when participants felt they had control over the process (e.g., being able to pick their own lawyer to defend them). Such process control or “voice” was associated with higher levels of perceived procedural fairness and satisfaction (Latour, 1978).

Prior to Thibaut and Walker's work, most justice research focused on distributive justice, or the perceived fairness of outcomes (Colquitt et al., 2000). Research demonstrating that participants at times equally cared about the fairness of the procedures themselves represented a significant evolution in thought and an expansion of the literature. Among the most notable contributions, Leventhal and colleagues (Leventhal, 1980; Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980) broadened the conditions for procedural justice to six criteria: (a) consistent application, (b) lack of bias, (c) availability and use of accurate information, (d) ability to appeal and correct flawed decisions, (e) ethicality, and (f) representativeness. Nevertheless, most evidence continued to bear out Thibaut and Walker's original findings across a range of situations and contexts (Lind & Tyler, 1988). In general, research participants who perceived greater opportunity to express their concerns also expressed higher levels of

satisfaction with decision makers, even in the absence of evidence that such decision makers were taking these concerns into account (Musante, Gilbert, & Thibaut, 1983; Tyler, Rasinski, & Spodick 1985). Results also suggest that fair procedure concerns seem largely unrelated to the stakes at hand (Casper, Tyler, & Fisher, 1988; Landis & Goodstein, 1986), prompting ethical concerns that authorities could manipulate procedures to make them “appear fair” and therefore “feel satisfying” (Lind & Tyler, 1998, p. 76) to participants. Others (see, e.g., Arvai, 2003) have recently echoed these concerns.

Although much of the early research on procedural justice examined judicial or workplace settings, political themes were also present (e.g., Rasinski, Tyler, & Fridkin; 1985; Tyler, 1986; Tyler & Caine, 1981; Tyler, Rasinski, & McGraw, 1985; Tyler, Rasinski & Spodick, 1985). This literature highlighted the centrality of citizens’ perceptions of fairness in how they judge political actors, as well as the potential that the aggregate of such judgment might play in overall system stability (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, Rasinski, & Griffin, 1986).

### **The Relational Model**

Because of its emphasis on how procedures influence decision control, Thibaut and Walker’s model is sometimes referred to as the “control” or “instrumental” model of procedural justice (Tyler, 1989). Subsequent research began to show that individuals cared about procedural justice even when it did not increase decision control because the procedures signified something about their relationship with authorities and other group members. In one key early study, Tyler and Folger (1980) found that citizens’ experiences with law enforcement officials influenced perceptions of procedural justice, even when they did not get the outcomes they may have preferred: When citizens believed that police treated them fairly and recognized their rights, they were more positive about their encounters even when they did not get the outcomes they may have preferred (i.e., getting out of a violation). Although this study suggests that interpersonal interactions can influence justice judgments, the authors did not examine how specific messages communicated during these interactions may have led to perceptions of fairness and respect.

Expanding on this and other research, Lind and Tyler (1988) proposed the relational or “group value” model of procedural justice, which theorized that individuals view treatment by authorities as a reflection of how respected they are within a relevant social group. Moreover, when they view this treatment as fair, they are more favorable toward the authorities and the outcomes. This model addressed questions about why “voice” appeared to affect procedural justice assessments even when study participants had been told that their opinions would not be inte-

grated into future decisions (e.g., Musante et al., 1983; Lind, Kanfer, & Earley, 1990; Tyler, Rasinski, & Spodick, 1985). That is, instrumental benefits of voice were not the only factor influencing fairness perceptions; relational aspects were important as well. As Tyler (1996) explained:

People do not have to get favorable outcomes, or feel they have control over decisions, before they will comply with group rules or do things on behalf of the group. Instead, relationally fair treatment can promote feelings of pride and respect that in turn encourage group-serving behavior. (p. 925)

The relational model proposed that individuals attend most to three procedural variables when making assessments of fairness: trustworthiness of authorities, neutrality of authorities, and social standing or group status (Tyler, 1989). Trust refers to the perception that authorities will treat group members in a fair and reasonable way. Neutrality relates to a belief that authorities will use available facts and rules rather than personal interest in allocation decisions. Finally, social standing or group status is the degree to which individuals believe that authorities are treating group members with dignity and showing respect for their rights.

Subsequent research provided support for the relational model (Tyler, 1994; Tyler & Degoey, 1995; Tyler et al., 1996), as well as offered additional insights. Van den Bos, in particular, extensively explored Lind's "fairness heuristic" theory (Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, & Deverapark, 1993) and found that fairness was most critical in situations of uncertainty (van den Bos, 2001; van den Bos & Miedema, 2000; van den Bos, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997). Further, the key type of uncertainty in most allocation decisions involves the ceding of power to an authority with consequent feelings of uncertainty about the individual's relationship to the authority (van den Bos et al., 1997). In such situations, Lind et al. (1993) have argued that individuals use perceived procedural fairness as a means of determining whether or not to accept the unknown authority figure's legitimacy.

### **Interactional and Informational Justice**

Although research on distributive and procedural justice has dominated the justice literature, alternative models containing more overt communicative aspects have been proposed. In particular, Bies and Moag (1986) have suggested an interactional model of justice that emphasizes the interpersonal treatment that individuals receive in the decision-making process. Greenberg (1993) refined this model into one having interpersonal and informational justice dimensions, which he called *social* aspects of procedural and distributive justice, or aspects related to treatment. Greenberg contrasted this with structural aspects of justice, or those relating to context. According to Greenberg, structural aspects of

procedural justice refer to the ways procedures are structured to promote systemic justice, which is enhanced via attention to Leventhal's criteria (Leventhal, 1980; Leventhal et al., 1980) or participant control (Greenberg, 1993). Regarding the social aspects of justice, Greenberg explained that interpersonal justice focuses on communication related to outcomes (and, therefore, distributive justice), including expressions of remorse, concern over misfortune, or apologies. As such, interpersonal justice consoles people about unfavorable outcomes (Colquitt et al., 2000). Informational justice, in comparison, relates to communication about procedures, including open sharing of information, transparency of the process, or adequacy of procedural explanations. It also refers to explanations people receive that enable them to evaluate the context of the procedures (Colquitt et al., 2000).

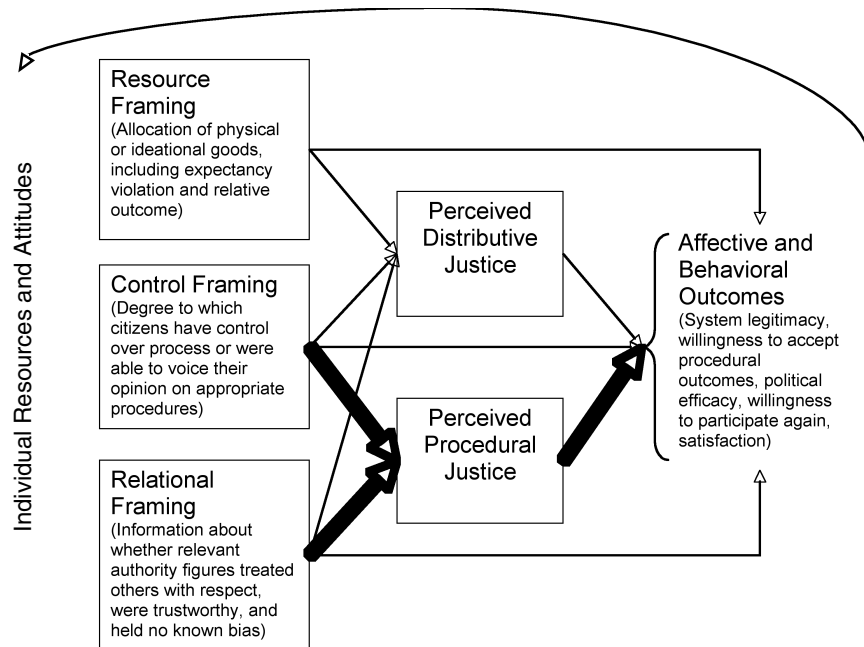
Colquitt (2001) subsequently found support for a four-factor justice model comprised of procedural, distributive, interpersonal, and informational components. The procedural aspect includes Leventhal's fairness criteria, such as voice, influence over outcome, consistency, bias, accuracy of underlying information, ability to appeal, and morality of process. The distributive aspect addresses whether individual input is matched by equity in outcomes. Interpersonal justice relates to the dignity and respect with which participants are treated. Finally, informational justice pertains to how well procedures are explained and communicated, in terms of quality and timeliness. Colquitt's (2001) research also suggested that each factor distinctly predicted different outcomes: Procedural justice predicted rule compliance and organizational commitment, distributive justice predicted outcome satisfaction and perceived instrumentality of one's efforts, interpersonal justice predicted leader evaluations and helping behavior, and informational justice predicted collective esteem. Research continues to explore the dimensionality of organizational justice, including the possibility of extending the model to include additional factors (Blader & Tyler, 2003). At present, however, distributive and procedural remain the most widely studied and replicated dimensions of organizational justice.

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### **Communicating Procedural Justice**

The preceding review suggests that communication is an essential if not yet well-developed component of procedural justice research, something that others have noted as well (Hillier, 1998). The role of communication is most evident in Greenberg's (1993) discussion of informational and interpersonal justice, but it is also an implicit component of Tyler and colleagues' group value model, which maintains that procedures symbolically communicate to individuals whether they are valued group

**Figure 1.** Proposed training model of procedural justice and public deliberation.



members. At this point, however, neither Greenberg’s nor Tyler and colleagues’ approach has resulted in a model of justice that can account explicitly for communication that occurs before, during, or after the decision-making process that can influence justice perceptions and resulting affective and behavioral outcomes.

Despite its relative absence from communication studies, our review of procedural justice research suggests that the concept holds considerable promise for exploring communication-related questions. In particular, we believe that the concept of procedural justice can enhance our understanding of the influence that an individual’s experience with public engagement has on that individual’s future willingness to engage, as well as his or her system-level beliefs related to the legitimacy of the process and satisfaction with the outcomes. Moreover, we argue that these experiences can originate through direct experience, media content, or a combination of both.

**Proposed Framing Model**

Figure 1 lays out a structural model of the potential relationships among exposure to public engagement and/or media content, justice perceptions, and affective and/or behavioral responses. The model owes its largest debt to the work Tyler and colleagues have done to highlight and test the key relational variables underlying perceptions of fair process (i.e., trustworthiness, neutrality, and respectfulness). Efforts to under-

stand procedural justice will also need to consider the degree of control (e.g., voice, representation) individuals feel they had in decision-making process. This position would seem largely to echo the importance afforded external efficacy in political science models aimed at predicting civic participation (e.g., Finkel, 1985; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 2000). In addition to relational and control frames, we include resource frames to address aspects of distributive justice relating to fairness or equity of benefits and costs associated with outcomes. Past procedural justice research has suggested that the darkest arrows should exhibit the strongest relationships; however, other direct and indirect relationships may also occur.

We hypothesize that direct or mediated experience with public engagement processes will expose individuals to content that may be framed in a way to lead individuals to make procedural justice judgments. These judgments, in turn, may predict civically oriented affective and behavioral outcomes. Rather than perceiving frames as intrinsic, our approach concurs with scholars who have defined frames as more actively created, such as by “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution” (Entman, 2004, p. 5). In experimental research, framing can be operationalized as saying the same thing in a different way (e.g., a win or loss) with a resultant impact on individuals’ use of cognitive shortcuts or heuristics to process the new information (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1984). However, media researchers often use what Tankard (2001) referred to as a “list of frames” approach, which involves creating a coding scheme relevant to a particular issue and assessing whether any given story contains the specific content of interest (for recent examples, see Brewer & Sigelman, 2002; de Vreese, Peter, & Semetko, 2001). In our view, these lists of different content can be considered frames or framing inasmuch as the content provided increases the likelihood that those exposed to it will think about the issue in a particular way (e.g., thinking of nuclear power or biotechnology as an economic or technological issue rather than a risk or a moral issue; Gamson & Modigliana, 1989; Nisbet & Lewenstein, 2002).<sup>1</sup>

We intentionally propose a general hypothesis, one meant to apply to exposure to justice-related messages through public discussion or the mass media. As drawn, the model is unidirectional, but the nature of the outcomes (e.g., willingness to participate in the future) will clearly lead to the type of reflexive looping that Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw (2002) suggested and Pateman (1970) described as the “transformative” aspect of deliberation. Although our model is largely silent on the types of opinions, attitudes, or values that individuals may bring with them to any



system of messages, these predispositions are clearly important contextual factors and should be included in future research. At present, however, our primary interest is to provide guidance toward specifically linking exposure to justice-related content, justice judgments, and attitudes and behavior. At its core, procedural justice argues that the process itself matters.

To illustrate the proposed model and its proposed relationships, it may be helpful to consider a hypothetical example set in the context of a community-level investigation of a public health threat, such as the revelation of an unusually high number of cancer incidences within a community (i.e., a perceived cancer “cluster”). In such cases, public health authorities might launch an investigation, and the local media would likely cover that investigation. The nature of such an investigation might lead to the hosting of one or more public meetings at which public health scientists might provide community members with information about the study process and, ultimately, results. The local media would likely cover the public meetings as part of their overall coverage of the cancer cluster investigation.

In such a case, we would expect community members to be exposed to communication messages that would affect whether or not they perceived the government’s response to the community concerns as fair to them, their families, and their neighbors. For example, messages might frame the cancer cluster threat as an issue of potential decreases in property values or as an immediate risk of personal sickness (resource allocation framing). Community members might alternatively be exposed to messages that frame the cluster threat in terms of how much control community members can or will have over the course of the investigation, including the degree to which the health authorities are willing to listen to community members concerns (control framing). Finally, citizens might be exposed to messages relating the degree to which authorities can be trusted, remain neutral, and treat the various members of the community with dignity and respect (relational framing). Such framing alternatives could share relatively equal prominence, or one could dominate the others. As previously noted, the source of these messages could be personal experience at public meetings, exposure to postmeeting media content, or both. A third source of messages could be interpersonal conversations that would likely follow the public meeting, for example, discussions with neighbors, friends, or family members about the public meeting. Although our model does not formally specify a role for these conversations, we see our approach as complementing previous research examining the influence that interpersonal discussion can have on future intentions to engage politically (Scheufele, 2000a).

In practice, it seems necessary to operationalize resource, control, and relational framing as specific types of content consistent with the list of

frames approach (Tankard, 2001). Nevertheless, it seems clear that each of the potential framing options or frames also represent a different way that someone might be encouraged to think about a local cancer concern. Recalling the idea of fairness judgments as a heuristic tool (Lind et al., 1993), we created a model that remains consistent with a definition of framing as presenting information about the same topic in a different way (Tversky & Kahneman, 1984).

Whether experienced directly or indirectly, the messages themselves could be analyzed using quantitative content analysis. Such an approach would be very similar to the coding work underlying Gamson's (1992) comparison of the frames used by working-class Bostonians to discuss a series of public issues and concurrent media framing of the same issues. Gangl's (2003) use of simulated newspaper stories in her look at procedural justice provides an initial hint of the appropriateness of framing analysis to procedural justice research. Gangl's work is also, however, just an extension of many other procedural justice projects that used scenario-based research designs (e.g., Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Tyler & Caine, 1981; Tyler, Rasinski, & Spodick, 1985; van den Bos et al., 1997). The methodology of scenario research on procedural justice—wherein research subjects are exposed to one of a series of carefully manipulated stimulus texts—seems analogous to research on the effects of framing.

Having obtained an understanding of the framing experienced by community members, the procedural justice approach should allow researchers to predict the type of justice judgments that community members will make. These judgments should, in turn, help predict how community members will react to the communication efforts of health officials, including the reporting of any health investigations' conclusions and recommendations.

Experimental evidence can provide an understanding of the potential impact of different sets of messages, but multilevel data from a range of communities on both community members' individual justice perceptions and the message systems in their community might best support the hypotheses developed here. Beyond our hypothetical cancer cluster investigation, it is a straightforward process to imagine other issues, whether the siting of a new landfill or the design of a new public monument, about which it would be possible to explore relationships between exposure to justice frames, justice judgments, and affective or behavioral outcomes.

The next few paragraphs situate our approach within current research on public engagement, which focuses primarily on individual determinants of participation rather than experiences with the engagement itself. Procedural justice is thus proposed as a concept that can guide an exploration on the relationship between engagement and individual experiences.

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### **Procedural Justice and Public Engagement**

We have purposefully chosen to describe our model in relation to public engagement, which we view as encompassing a broad spectrum of methods, levels of involvement, and topics of public discussion. Nevertheless, procedural justice research is arguably most relevant to public engagement methods within which participants are aware of the (potential) role of authority figures in making decisions, setting policy, or otherwise taking action. In perceiving a role for an authority, such participants are thus able to make judgments based on their view of the process underlying any eventual decision. In our view, most methods of public engagement, including the examples provided below, fit within this description and are thus relevant to the current discussion.

Most communication research addressing public engagement looks at the role media play in fostering and supporting such engagement (e.g., Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; McLeod, Scheufele, Moy, Horowitz, et al., 1999; Scheufele, 1999, 2000a). Much of this research is informed by Verba and colleagues' work (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 2000), as well as Putnam's (1995, 2000) warning about the decline of civic engagement in America. Such research treats willingness to participate in a public forum as an outcome variable that can be partially predicted by assessing how much individuals use or pay attention to various types of media, their political efficacy, and their socioeconomic status. A variation of this research includes measures of interpersonal discussion alongside other controls to help explain outcomes, such as knowledge and participation (Holbert, Benoit, Hansen, & Wen, 2002; Kim et al., 1999; McLeod, Scheufele, Moy, Horowitz, et al., 1999; Scheufele, 1999, 2000a, 2002; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001).

The centrality of public engagement in the study of media effects is complemented by a smaller body of political communication research that focuses specifically on political forums themselves, from public meetings to deliberative polls and consensus conferences (Einsiedel, 2002; Einsiedel & Eastlick, 2000; Einsiedel, Jelsoe, & Breck, 2001; Fishkin, 1997; Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Gastil & Dillard, 1999a, 1999b; Gastil, Deiss, & Weiser, 2002; Joss & Durant, 1995; Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000; Rowe, Marsh, & Frewer, 2004; Ryfe, 2002). This research emphasizes the role deliberation plays in transforming participants into individuals with more political resources, such as efficacy and knowledge.

For our purposes, it is important to recognize that most of the research focuses more on demonstrating the antecedent conditions or potential impacts of public engagement than on addressing relationships between specific procedures and outcomes. That is, little research appears to have ventured into the "black box" or internal machinations of

the engagement itself to explore how the procedures may have influenced outcomes. The resulting challenge for both researcher and practitioner becomes separating outcomes that they observe from specific aspects of their sometimes elaborate deliberative procedures.

For example, Einsiedel and colleagues emphasized the potential importance of a range of outcomes of deliberative consensus conferences and concluded that deliberation among citizens can lead to coherent policy positions that deserve incorporation into policy discussions (Einsiedel, 2002; Einsiedel & Eastlick, 2000; Einsiedel et al., 2001). Though provocative, this research focuses on a single deliberative format, the consensus conference, which may limit the ability to generalize findings to other formats. Others have drawn similar conclusions (e.g., Joss & Durant, 1995).

Focusing on single formats of deliberation has created challenges for other researchers who they attempted to make causal connections between specific procedural aspects and outcomes. Reviews of deliberative polling (Fishkin 1997; Fishkin & Luskin, 1999), for instance, devote significant attention to outcome variables associated with opinion change, while emphasizing the representativeness of those included in the deliberation. Although representativeness corresponds to having a voice and is thus a key aspect of procedural fairness (e.g., Leventhal, 1980), research on deliberative polling does not fully explore this connection. Similarly, evaluations of National Issue Forums demonstrate that such events can attract broad participation and lead to increased knowledge and political sophistication (Gastil & Dillard, 1999a; 1999b) without commenting on how individuals judged the internal workings of the events. Gastil's research on juries (Gastil et al., 2002) focused on how jury deliberation influenced voting but could conclude only that the act of coming up with a verdict is an important correlate of future voting activity but that length of deliberation was not a factor. Rowe and Frewer (2000) proposed a framework for evaluating deliberation that included both procedural and instrumental aspects; however, their attempt to use this framework ultimately reported on each aspect separately without making extensive interlinkages between procedural and instrumental success (Rowe et al., 2004).

Ryfe (2002) was perhaps unique in having looked at a number of different deliberative processes, which allowed him to comment on a range of outcomes while venturing to suggest how different procedures may produce different outcomes. He noted that those who take part in deliberation seem to emerge feeling both better informed and more connected to their communities, responses that may have led to actual greater levels of participation. In terms of process, he used discussions with practitioners to argue that the success of an event involving deliberation is

linked to the organizers' ability to get participants to recognize a common bond. Mendelberg and Oleske (2000) reached a similar conclusion from their review of several town meetings linked to school zoning and race.<sup>2</sup>

At a theoretical level, Ryfe's (2002) summary of outcomes parallels those suggested by Burkhalter et al.'s (2002) deliberative framework. This model places deliberation in the middle of both civic inputs and outputs for the individual that include variations of such potential outcome variables as knowledge, skills, political efficacy, and sense of community. The authors argued for a self-reinforcing model wherein "participating in face-to-face public deliberation strengthens the cognitions, attitudes and habits" (p. 413) conducive to future deliberation. Although this model captures the main types of deliberative outcomes described above, it does not elaborate on the perceptions of participants that occur during the point of actual deliberation. As Ryfe (2002) concluded, "More work needs to be done to identify which deliberative practices work in what contexts and why" (p. 370).

Corresponding research on environmental decision making has offered evidence that the fairness of discussion procedures in government-sponsored public outreach efforts can influence affective variables, such as the audience's satisfaction with the process (Lauber & Knuth, 1999; McComas, 2003; Renn, Webler, & Weidemann, 1995; Webler & Tuler, 2000). Other research focusing more generally on communication that takes place in decision-making groups has found that satisfaction is influenced by the quality of group members' contributions (Gouran, 1973), the degree of conflict within the group or how group conflict is managed (Wall, Galanes, & Love, 1987), and the extent of participation in the decision (Cooper & Wood, 1974). Finally, early group communication research has suggested a link between satisfaction with participation and a willingness to participate in future group decisions (Gouran, 1973). Although these group studies were not grounded in a procedural justice framework, the results are arguably supportive of a justice approach.

A large portion of environmental public participation research centers on questions of representation, asking such questions as, do public meeting participants represent the public? (Gundry & Heberlein, 1984; see also Johnson, Johnson, Edwards, & Wheaton, 1993; McComas, 2001). Most of this research, however, does not definitively link procedural aspects to outcomes. Chess and Purcell (1999), for example, provided an extensive review of public participation methods but were unable to identify consistent patterns across methods between procedures and outcomes. In perhaps the largest review of public participation methods to date, Beierle and Cayford (2002) reviewed 239 cases to deter-

mine procedural correlates with success—an aggregate variable measuring whether the process educated and informed the public, incorporated public values into decisions, improved the substantive quality of decisions, resolved conflict among competing interests, and built trust in institutions. Their analysis showed that the strongest predictor of success was agency responsiveness, measured as the agency’s “commitment to and communication with participants” (p. 50). Other significant correlates were quality of deliberation, measured as “the primacy of good arguments rather than overt power, the ability to question claims and assumptions, participant sincerity and honesty, and comprehension” (p. 52), and the degree of public control, defined as the extent to which participants controlled “the initiation, design, and execution of the public participation process” (p. 53). Although their analysis suggests aspects of procedural justice, they did not explicitly examine their findings within a theoretical framework.

In sum, we believe that the concept of procedural justice can provide a useful framework for linking procedural elements to outcomes in a range of public engagement efforts. At minimum, procedural justice suggests that any attempt to discuss the effects of engagement should begin by assessing participants’ perceptions of the process, including perceptions of the sponsors or authorities in charge of the process. In addition to satisfaction, other important outcomes of participation include continued participation or willingness to take efforts on the organization or community’s behalf (also called extrarole behavior). Other outcomes deserving attention include willingness to accept outcomes of discussion or deliberation, perceived legitimacy of the authorities and the decision-making system, and organizational or community commitment.

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### **Exploring Justice Frames: Directions for Future Research**

Initial communication research related to procedural justice should establish at least two aspects: (a) the relative presence or absence of procedural justice framing in news media content and (b) the influence of such framing on justice judgments. The first step entails the development of a coding scheme for content analysis to capture the degree to which any given body of political discussion is framed in a way that might lead to assessments of justice. Whereas Gangl (2003) manipulated only the outcome and presentation of overall process fairness, a coding scheme designed to capture content relevant to judgments needs to assess all of the various facets of procedural justice, including the three main aspects of relational justice: trust, neutrality, and social standing (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992).

Rather than focusing only on media coverage, communication research should also examine actual interactions (e.g., transcripts or audiovisual recordings) that occur during public engagement events for procedural justice frames. Whereas Tyler and colleagues specify only a symbolic role for communication in influencing procedural justice perceptions, we maintain that authorities and participants in a deliberative process intentionally or unintentionally can influence such perceptions through verbal and/or nonverbal messages. In this manner, our approach finds some solidarity with research on relational communication in groups, which examines how communication constitutes and shapes relationships (Rogers & Escudero, 2004). Parallels between Tyler and colleagues' relational approach to procedural justice and relational communication in groups are apparent particularly in Keyton's (1999) definition of relational communication, which describes it as verbal and nonverbal messages that "help individuals identify where they fit within the network of intragroup relationships, the status and power other members attribute to them, and/or how well liked they are by other members" (p. 193). Differences between the two areas of study are also present, however, most clearly with regard to level of analysis. More specifically, content-analytic procedures are central to relational communication scholarship (Rogers & Escudero, 2004), but essentially absent in procedural justice research. Research on Tyler and colleagues' group value model, for instance, focuses on individuals' perceptions of procedural fairness without considering any independent or "real" measure of fairness. Although the informational and interpersonal models of justice examine participants' perceptions of interactions more explicitly, they also rely on perceptions of interactions and do not use coding schemes to examine the interactions themselves.

Survey data would complement media and discussion content data and provide the requisite information for testing the hypotheses. Based on previous research, we would hypothesize that exposure to relational frames that portray authority figures as trustworthy, neutral/unbiased, and respectful of citizens' dignity and standing will be associated with higher levels of outcomes associated with civic health and solidarity. These affective and behavioral outcomes can include perceived legitimacy of the system, satisfaction with and acceptance of the outcomes, commitment to the organization or community, political efficacy, and willingness to engage in future deliberative activities. The opposite should also be true. Moreover, we maintain that exposure to these frames can occur (a) directly via participation in the discussion forum, (b) indirectly via media content, or (c) directly and indirectly. Research could explore the relative influence of each channel on outcome variables.

Framing research suggests additional hypotheses as well. In particu-

lar, framing research on news coverage of civic life suggests that political strategy and gamesmanship frames appear more often than substantive discussion of political issues. In addition, research has suggested that strategy frames can result in an increased cynicism among readers (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), as well as decreases in voter turnout, trust in government, perceived civic duty, and perceived meaningfulness of elections (Valentino, Beckman, & Buhr, 2001). Fallows (1997) argued that strategy frames represent the substitution of pseudo-news for true discourse and are therefore bad for democracy (see also Kerbel, Apee, & Ross, 2000; Rhee, 1997). Calling them procedural rather than strategy frames, Entman (2004) echoed the criticism that they do little to motivate citizens or provide them with information necessary to make decisions.

Procedural justice research, in comparison, would suggest that at times, procedural information is indeed germane to an individual's judgment of procedural fairness because these judgments can influence a host of outcome variables related to public engagement. The procedural justice approach suggested here argues that, on most issues, most of the time, the most important news users could get may be information that allows them to make judgments about how fairly decisions are being made.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than arguing that all procedural or strategy frames necessarily dampen democratic impulses, procedural justice research would suggest a need for a more expansive understanding of what procedural aspects of public discourse are most important to civic attitudes and behavior. Put differently, it seems important to determine which procedural frames corrode individuals' will or capacity to engage in civic life. For instance, do frames that highlight the neutrality and trustworthiness of the decision makers, or, instead, that focus on a politician's dishonesty (i.e., relational frames) influence satisfaction with the outcomes? Do frames that emphasize the voice that citizens had in the decision or, conversely, that emphasize that they were turned away at the polls (i.e., control frames) influence citizens' sense of political efficacy? Greater attention to the specific aspects of political strategies reported in news coverage may allow for the analysis of these strategies within a procedural justice framework. It may be that emphasizing political strategy or gamesmanship diminishes the voice of everyday citizens in political life (i.e., control), leaving the impression that political actors are manipulating the system to suit their own needs. If this were the case, we would hypothesize that readers of such stories would make negative procedural justice perceptions with associated negative consequences for civic life, even in the absence of specific content about trust, neutrality, or standing. Such a finding could provide an improved theoretical understanding of why strategy-oriented media coverage is associated with negative civic out-



comes. Although it seems less possible that someone exposed to purely contextual information might make justice judgments, it may be that the type of relational information of interest to procedural researchers is more likely to appear in nonstrategic stories. Future research can address these and other questions.

Viewing the framing of procedural justice in relation to civic life offers a range of additional avenues for comparative investigation. For example, given a better understanding of the types of media content that promotes justice judgments, researchers could look for variations in how the media depict the procedural aspect of political decision making and decision makers between levels of government, between communities, between issues, and over time. Fairness could also be an important aspect to consider when looking at specific issues related to new technologies and risk, which entail aspects of uncertainty, as well as resource allocation. An effort to look at patterns of procedural justice over time would complement Patterson's (1994) and Devitt's (1997) efforts to show the emergence of strategic framing. Historical analyses might also provide a civically oriented "cultural indicator" of the type proposed by Gerbner (1969, 1973; see also Shanahan, 2004; Shanahan & Morgan, 1998). The idea of cultural indicators emerged at roughly the same time as framing research but makes a stronger argument for the importance of looking at media coverage over time.

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### **Conclusion**

Thirty years of social-psychological research has shown that perceived fairness of outcomes (i.e., distributive justice) is not necessarily the most important factor in how people perceive authority figures, particularly when the issue at hand does not lead itself to simple judgments of fact. Put another way, getting one's way is not the only aspect that matters; the means to the end makes a difference as well. To be clear, procedural justice theory does not argue that the procedures alone are what motivate participants to vote, attend public meetings, or sit on citizen advisory councils; however, it does suggest that an individual's experiences with the public engagement methods can influence future civic-oriented attitudes and behaviors. In turn, researchers examining public engagement, whether directly or via mass media, should consider assessing the degree to which participants believe they have had the opportunity to express their voice, as well as their perceptions about the trustworthiness, neutrality, and respectfulness of engagement sponsors. Communication researchers seeking to benefit from the insights of procedural justice research could further attempt to disaggregate the specific frames

that influence justice perceptions and the potential relationships between these frames and the types of civically relevant outcome variables described above. Additional theorization should also explore more deeply how a relational approach to justice might be linked to theories specifically linked to participation, such as Verba et al.'s (2000) resource-oriented civic voluntarism model.

As researchers interested in the integration of theories across disciplines, we further believe that exploring procedural justice provides a unique opportunity to bring together ideas representing the breadth of the social sciences, as well as political philosophy. Further, although past procedural justice researchers have mainly taken quantitative approaches, the historical and cultural depth of the concept would seem to provide opportunities for methodological diversity in future investigations into how fairness affects relationships among and between individuals and groups.

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<sup>1</sup> For a conceptual review of the framing literature and various definitions, see Entman (1993), Scheufele (1999, 2000b), or Reese (2001). As Scheufele (1999) argued, framing research can be divided into a number of subcomponents. Given that our ultimate interest is to understand how media frames related to procedural justice affect audiences, the component that most interests us here are media frames as independent variables. This means that we are ignoring, for now, the process of how frames are constructed within the media and the existence of corresponding frames or schemas within individuals. Commonly cited early explications of the idea of framing include those of Goffman (1974) and Gitlin (1980).

<sup>2</sup> In Mendelberg and Oleske's (2000) example, however, the problem is that meeting participants are unable or unwilling to put the interests of the larger community ahead of narrow, subgroup interests.

<sup>3</sup> One question is whether procedural justice frames are more relevant to the type of local community politics described in this article than are the national, election-related politics, which tend to dominate framing research in political communication (Lawrence, 2000). Research has demonstrated, however, the influence of procedural justice perceptions in studies examining the perceived fairness of decision making at the U.S. Supreme Court (Tyler et al., 1996), as well as the White House (Tyler, Rasinski, & McGraw, 1985), which suggests a broader applicability of the model than simply local affairs.

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