

Original Research Article

A Research Based on the Chinese Distribution System: Social justice, merit principle preference and stress in a low socioeconomic group

ABSTRACT

The current study investigated whether social justice has a positive effect on the individuals of low socioeconomic status, who have a high preference for the merit principle. We used the Merit Principle Scale and Social Class Scale to assign the study's low-socioeconomic participants into two groups: those who had a high preference for the merit principle (HPMP), and those who had a low preference for the merit principle (LPMP). We adopted two factors between participants design. A total of 72 undergraduates from the low socioeconomic class of Southwest University participated in this research. They included two samples: participants who identified themselves as having a HPMP (11 men, 25 women) and those having a LPMP (14 men, 22 women). The participants were randomly assigned to either a social justice condition or a social injustice condition. In the social justice condition, the article described society as being fair. In the social injustice condition, the article emphasized that society is unfair. The results showed that social justice can reduce participants' stress, and that individuals with a HPMP felt more stress than individuals with a LPMP in a socially unjust condition. In addition, a significant correlation is found between personal's value of preference for the merit principle and the government just distribution policy. Individuals will perceive less stress when people's value of distribution principle is consistent with the distribution system which society is implementing. On the contrary, individuals will have more stress when their value of preference for the merit is not consistent with the government's distribution system.

Social justice can successfully buffer the stress among the low socioeconomic status, especially for the individuals who have a high degree preference for the merit principle. Individuals will perceive less stress when personal's value is consistent with the government policy than those who are not.

Keywords: *Social justice; unjust; the value of preference merit principle; perceived stress; socioeconomic status; distribution system*

1. INTRODUCTION

Political economist and social psychologist have given a lot of attention to the distributive justice. Political economists agree that a trade-off exists between efficiency and equality [1]. On the one hand, previous studies on social justice, Okun (1975) argued that society in living standards and in material wealth reflect a system of rewards and penalties that is intended to encourage effort and channel it into socially productive activity [1], therefore, an efficient economy is generated. As we all known, to go for efficiency, would be create inequalities and to reduce regulation and taxation to translate into less welfare spending and less protection for those least equipped to fend for themselves in a free-market society [2]. On the other hand, to promote social equality, these egalitarian measures are more likely to result in economic inefficiencies, because the redistribution process inevitably involves "leakage" caused by human error, fraud, and the complex bureaucratic agencies required to implement social programs [2]. In addition, excessive inequality may be lead to

socially divisive, such as it may motivate the poor to engage in illegal activities and riots [3], and Persson and Tabellini (1991) also found a statistically significant and quantitatively important negative relation between inequality and economic growth [4]. From the above discussion it should be clear that, efficiency and equality are often in conflict with each other [5]. For this reason, it is important to know how much efficiency or equality they are willing to choose. Boulding (1962) argued that societies continually compromise between efficiency and equality [6]. He claimed that, people prefer a distribution of rewards that are based on merit; to avoid alienating the disadvantaged, however, people are inclined to favor redistribution to meet the basic needs and provide opportunities to gain the self-reliant. In the present study, we focus on the boulding's propositions. This proposal is consistent with the Chinese government's system. That is efficiency and equality both emphasized in the initial distribution and redistribution, and equality more important than efficiency in the redistribution.

1.1 Social Stratification and Distribution System in China

According to the social stratification theory, Weber recognized that humans have always been divided by not only economic ownership but also occupational skills, status, and organizational power or class, status, and power/party [7]. Inequality is almost surely as old as the human species, for example, in India, men gave thought to the basis of social inequality long before the Christian era and in 350 BCE, Aristotle wrote of the natural ranking of free people and slaves [8]. Nonetheless, people would behave completely different reactions toward inequality, the first of these viewpoints as the "conservative thesis", one is essentially supportive of the status quo, viewing the existing distribution of rewards as just, equitable, and frequently also inevitable, and the second as the "radical antithesis", one is highly critical, denouncing the distributive system as basically unjust and unnecessary [8]. In the current study, we explore what kind of response will be made by individuals after experience the inequality.

Chinese social stratification and social mobility have had a fast-growing since China's post-1978 economic reforms. Before 1978, Parish (1981) argued that Mao's egalitarianism reduced effectively socioeconomic inequalities [9]. However, only a tiny fraction of the rural had the chance to "move up" to cities through military mobilization, marriage, education and job assignments [10], because rigid household registration institution, and *hukou*, that restricted all Chinese to their place of birth for all their lifetime [11]. In the 21st century, economic growth and the resulting structural change may lead to alter the distribution of power and opportunity [12]. In any society there is a tendency for privilege groups to try to close ranks, preserve their advantages and pass them on to their children, but it would curb social justice and reduce the economic efficiency [13]. In this paper, from the above-mentioned, class mobility play an important role in social justice, in the next experiment manipulation, we will be involved of the class mobility.

In addition, social stratification itself implies inequality [8]. And the resources they share increased different significantly among social classes. Realistic group conflict theory indicated that conflicts of interest resulted in intense dislike and negative feelings between groups [14], especially for the disadvantaged. Because of their lack of resources and status in society, individuals with low economic status are often treated more harshly than individuals of high economic status [15]. The experience of being treated unfairly and the sense of powerlessness associated with it also appear to influence beliefs about being treated unfairly. For example, African American college students are more likely to believe they are being targeted by government conspiracies than are European American college students [16]. Other research indicates that there is a positive correlation between perceived injustice and devaluing academic performance among African American college students [17].

The 16th National Congress of CPC establish the principle that "labor, capital, technology, managerial expertise and other production factors participate in the distribution of income in accordance with their contributions, thereby improving the system under which distribution according to work is dominant and a variety of modes of distribution coexist." Our experimental manipulation about social justice is consistent with the government's distribution system.

1.2 The value of Preference for the Merit Principle

Preference for the merit principle is the concept that people who contribute more ought to obtain more than people who contribute less in any endeavor [18]. This principle has been found to guide resource sharing even in preschoolers [18]. Meritocracy is considered as an ideal justice principle because it considers only relevant inputs (e.g., abilities) and it ignores irrelevant factors (e.g., ethnicity, gender) when distributing outcomes [19]. Therefore, distributing resources according to merit is considered by some to be the best way to share the benefits of cooperation in a mutually advantageous way [18].

In the process of implementing distribution system, preference for the merit principle as a values have salient difference among individuals. Individuals with a high preference for the merit principle (HPMP) report stronger feelings of unfairness toward an unjust hiring decision than individuals with a low preference for the merit principle (LPMP) [19], and individuals with a HPMP have more negative reactions about programs that violate distributive justice than individuals with

a LPMP [20]. Therefore, we speculated that the individuals from low socioeconomic groups who have a HPMP may feel more stress than individuals with a LPMP in an unjust society.

The social environment, such as the equity of situations, is related to the preference for the merit principle [21]. For example, research has found that chimpanzees refused to complete a social exchange when their partner received a superior reward for the same amount of effort [22]. Research also has found that chimpanzees respond negatively to distributional injustice [23]. Similarly, human subjects have been found to withdraw from an experiment when they realized that the rewards were extremely inequitable [24]. According to Adams (1965), the reason for this is that individuals feel resentment when outcomes are unfair, and they try to restore equity [21]. Under socially just circumstances, people are inclined to have a grateful attitude toward society, however, they readily show negative emotional reactions (e.g., angry, fear, anxiety) when they believe that social injustice prevails in society [25]. Based on previous research, we suspected that social justice may operate as a buffer against negative feelings and behaviors.

1.3 Hypothesis

The framings of creating a good relationship between the high status and the low status have important psychological and social implications. According to self-categorization theory, individuals can categorize themselves at either the individual or group level of inclusiveness [26]. When individual categorize himself at the group level and the ingroup is associated with inequitable treatment of outgroups, then the door is open for collective guilt to be experienced [27]. We can infer that individuals are treated inequitably among the low socioeconomic status will have a series of negative feelings. Because this kind of injustice further aggravate their disadvantage. In this study, we further analyzed the relationship between social justice, preference for the merit principle and perceived stress. We introduce the following hypothesis. Firstly, we hypothesized that social justice would effectively reduce the feeling of stress among individuals with a HPMP who have low socioeconomic status, but not for LPMP. Secondly, individuals who have a distribution value is consistent with the government's just distribution system will be less stress than individuals who are inconsistent. Thirdly, we hypothesized that there was a significant correlation between negative affect and stress after the individuals experienced unfair treatment.

2. METHODS

2.1 Overview

Our study focused on the group of low socioeconomic, we used a questionnaire to screen subjects. In addition, we are also concerned about the value of preference for the merit principle by completing scales. Then subjects will be randomly assigned to different conditions (social justice or social injustice). We try to explore if there is interaction between the social environment and the value of preference for the merit principle.

2.2 Sample

The sample was drawn from Southwest University, we randomly distribute 400 questionnaires to college students for screening subjects, 366 were returned, obtaining response rate of 91.5%. It achieved for the follow-up study.

A total of 72 undergraduates from the low socioeconomic class of Southwest University participated in this research. They included two samples: participants who identified themselves as having a HPMP (11 men, 25 women, Mage = 20.56 $\pm$ 1.38 years) and those having a LPMP (14 men, 22 women, Mage = 20.34 $\pm$ 1.20 years). The participants were randomly assigned to either a social justice condition or a social injustice condition. One participants' datum was excluded from the analyses because he did not believe the experimental manipulation.

2.3 Procedure

In step one, participants completed the Preference for Merit Principle Scale (PMP), which was adapted from previous studies [19] and Social Class Scale [28]. The PMP includes two subscales: the prescriptive beliefs scale (Cronbach's α = 0.71) and the descriptive beliefs scale (Cronbach's α = 0.80). Both of the subscales consists of seven items, each of which was rated by participants using a 7-point scale that ranged from 1= strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree. The difference between participants' prescriptive belief scores and descriptive belief scores was used as our measure of merit principle value, with higher scores indicating higher levels of preference for the merit principle (PMP). Two subgroups were identified—the high preference for merit principle (individuals with the highest 27 percent of PMP) and the low preference for merit principle (individuals with the lowest 27 percent of PMP). According to Lu xueyi (2003), the Social Class Scale includes their parents' levels of education, types of professions, and average monthly income [28].

Participants who have a lower score mean having a lower socioeconomic status. In addition, participants were also asked to report their demographic information.

In step two, participants individually went into a room where they were told that they would take part in a study investigating the reading comprehension of college students. Then, participants were asked to read one of two fabricated newspaper articles carefully. In the social justice condition, the article described society as being fair. For example, it emphasized the construction and maintenance of social fairness and the justice system, and that individuals in low socioeconomic groups can get ahead in life if they work hard enough. In the social injustice condition, the article emphasized that society is unfair, that the allocation of social resources is extremely unreasonable, and that individuals in low socioeconomic groups cannot get ahead in life even if they work hard.

In step three, participants were asked to complete a stress questionnaire that was adapted from previous studies [29]. The scale consisted of two items: "To what extent do you feel stressed about the article," "To what extent do you feel fearful about your future?" The response choices ranged from 1=not at all to 6=very much. We combined these two items to form a stress index (Cronbach's $\alpha=.72$), with higher scores indicating higher degrees of stress. After that, participants completed the Negative Affect Subscale (adopted from PANAS [30]), it includes 10-items self-report which measure of current emotional state that respectively includes items assessing negative affect (e.g., irritable, ashamed). The questions were answered on 5-point scales that ran from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much), the subscale of the negative affect had high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha=.88$), with higher scores indicating more negative emotion.

2.4 Manipulation Checks

At the end of study, participants rated the degree to which they felt a feeling of justice after reading the article, using a 6-point scale (from 1 = very fair to 6 = very unfair). Finally, they rated the degree to which they believed the article, on a 4-point (from 1 = not at all to 4 = very much).

3. RESULTS

3.1 Preliminary Analysis

We submitted participants' responses to the manipulation check to a one-way ANOVA as a function of condition. The result confirmed that participants felt a stronger feeling of unfairness ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.20$) in the unjust condition than participants in the just condition ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.2$), $F(1,70) = 31.98$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.32$. This result indicated that our experimental manipulation was effective.

Across the two experimental conditions, there was no significant difference among gender types in their response to stress, $F(1, 70) < 1$, ns.

3.2 Hypothesis Testing

The stress scores were analyzed using a 2×2 ANOVA, with two between factors: social environment (just vs. unjust) and preference for the merit principle (high vs. low). The results showed that the main effect of social justice was significant, $F(1, 70) = 20.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.24$, with participants in the unjust condition feeling more stress ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.81$) than those in the just condition ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.03$). More importantly, the social environment $\times$ preference for the merit principle interaction was significant, $F(1, 70) = 8.57$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.11$. Subsequent analyses of the simple effects showed that participants with a HPMP felt more stress under the unjust condition ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.51$) than participants under the just condition ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.33$), $F(1, 35) = 22.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.40$. There was no significant difference between the just ($M=3.72$, $SD=0.52$) and unjust conditions ($M=4.06$, $SD=0.95$) among participants with a LPMP, $F(1, 34) = 1.72$, $p = .20$ (see Figure 1). The result supports our hypothesis. That is the moderating effect of social justice on the individuals with HPMP response to stress. The main effect of preference for the merit principle was not significant, $F(1, 70) = 0.033$, $p = .86$.

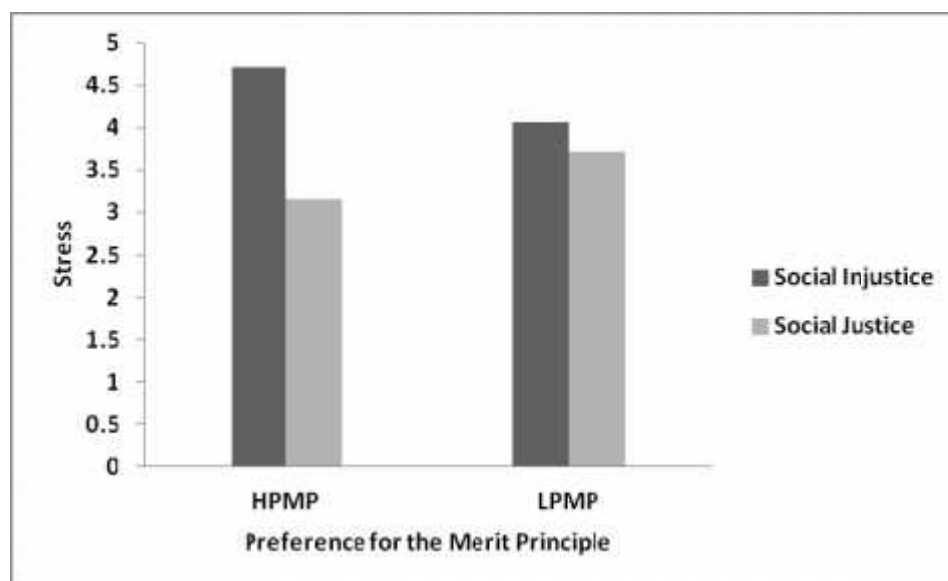


Fig. 1. Participants' stress as a function of the social environment (injustice/ justice) and preference for the merit principle (HPMP/LPMP)

And at the same time, we also found that participants with HPMP perceived more stress ($M=4.71$, $SD=0.51$) than those with LPMP ($M=4.06$, $SD=0.95$) under the unjust condition, $F(1, 35)=6.78$, $p=.05$, $\eta^2=0.17$. In the just condition, however, there was a marginally significant difference between individuals with HPMP ($M=3.15$, $SD=1.33$) and LPMP ($M=3.72$, $SD=0.52$), $F(1, 34)=2.89$, $p=0.098$ (see Figure 2). This result also confirm our previous assumptions, individuals will have less stress when their value of Preference for the Merit is consistent with the government's just distribution system. On the contrary, individuals will have more stress when their value of preference for the merit is not consistent with the government's distribution system.

In order to validate our third hypothesis, we used the Pearson product-moment correlation, and a significant positive correlation was found between the feeling of stress and negative emotion, $r=.32$, $p=.055$.

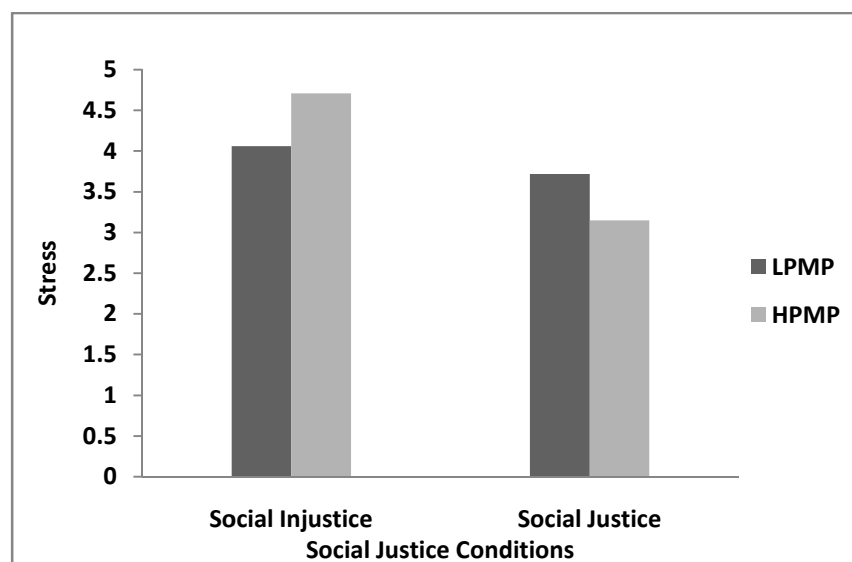


Fig. 2. The extent of the consistency between the value of preference for the merit and government's just distribution system

From this figure, social injustice is consistent with LPMP; social injustice is not consistent with HPMP; social justice is consistent with HPMP; social justice is not consistent with LPMP

4. DISCUSSION

In contemporary China, the government is fully aware of the importance of the trade-off between efficiency and equality. In this paper, according to the system of just distribution in China, we manipulate different social environment in

a laboratory, including social justice and social injustice. The findings showed that participants with a low socioeconomic status felt less stress in the social justice condition than their counterparts in the social injustice condition. In a similar vein, research has found that, compared to unfair offers of equal monetary value, fair offers led to higher happiness ratings, and activated several reward regions of the brain [31]. Chakarborty and McKenzie (2002) also show that stigmatized group members have a higher prevalence of psychiatric disorders than their dominant counterparts [32].

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether the link between preferences for the merit principle and stress could be moderated by social justice among individuals of low socioeconomic status. The findings of the present article indicate that participants with HPMP perceive more stress under the social injustice than those under the social justice. Yet, there is no significant difference, whether subjects read equitable article or read inequitable article among participants with LPMP. As mentioned before, individuals with low economic status are often treated more harshly than individuals of high economic status [15]. And the ego-defense theories emphasizes that members of disadvantaged groups will construe their social outcomes in ways that will enable them to buffer their personal self-esteem from threat [33]. Therefore, we suspect that individuals with LPMP faced the unjust circumstance, in order to protect themselves from the threat, they will tend to discount the personal diagnostic of negative outcomes [34]. And individuals with LPMP see social injustice as legitimate. A psychological theory of system justification argued that individuals would believe the process by which existing social arrangements are legitimized, even at the expose of personal and group interest [35]. Zinn (1968) noted that rebellion is only an occasional reaction to suffering in human history, and rather the inclination of people, faced with an overwhelming environment, to submit to it [36]. For example, African American participants generally accepted unfavorable stereotypes of their own group as lazy, irresponsible, and violent [37]. And a striking example of the depressed-entitlement effect, relative to men, women typically pay themselves less for the same labor [38]. On the contrary, individuals with HPMP, perceived more stress in the unjust condition than those in the just condition. Previous studies have found that a sense of injustice is triggered by violations of relative standards or established fairness norms [39]. Consequently, members of subordinated groups first seek to escape the implications of group membership by exercising individual exit and mobility options [40]. Moreover, these results seem to echo the introduction, namely is behave completely different reactions toward inequality between individuals with HPMP (radical antithesis) and LPMP (conservative thesis) among the low socioeconomic status.

The present research found that participants with a HPMP felt more stress than participants with a LPMP in the unjust condition, which is consistent with earlier experiment findings that individuals with a HPMP had more negative reactions to a program that violated distributive justice than did individuals with a LPMP [20]. From another perspective, based on the distribution system in China, that is distribution of outcome is in accordance with individuals' contributions to the achievements and tasks. Participants with the value of HPMP have a high degree of consistency with the distribution system of Chinese government. For the individuals who have the value of LPMP, however, there is a low degree of consistency with the distribution system of China government. The present research findings indicated that individuals will perceive less stress when people's value of distribution principle is consistent with the distribution system which society is implementing. Nevertheless, participants will perceive more stress when people's value of distribution principle is not consistent with the distribution system which society is implementing. Similar to the results of this study, Barnes and Kaase (1979) argued that dissatisfaction with government policies and relative deprivation were considered as a psychological determinant of individuals took part in protest [41]. Moreover, Lipset (1981) indicated that political system which is perceived as legitimate by the majority of citizens can remain stable despite severe economic or social problems, while those perceived as illegitimate will become unstable and even collapse [42]. According to Jie Chen and his colleagues (1997), the results showed that the communist regime had a good chance of remaining legitimate among a majority of the Chinese people [43].

Although there is a significant positive correlation between the feeling of stress and negative emotion, it is unclear from the present results whether stress as a mediating factors in the social justice for negative emotion among the low status. Research has found that poorer African Americans are more likely to report unfair treatment than African Americans of moderate income [44], individuals who are members of socially disadvantaged groups also must frequently contend with negative stereotypes, prejudice, and overt discrimination [34]. In this process, they readily show negative emotional reactions (e.g., angry, fear, anxiety) under unjust circumstance [25], in order to reduce the stress result from unfair treatment, the low socioeconomic group may try to get more much social resources, and then perceived less negative emotion.

The present research has an important practical implication in political psychology and political science. Specifically, the present research innovatively found that social justice could successfully buffer feelings of stress among participants with a HPMP. This finding indicates that a sense of social justice that guarantees a right to obtain a higher social status and social resources can be useful to a person in a low status group. Since, participants with a HPMP felt less stress under the just condition than participants under the unjust condition, they may be more likely to invest in changing their social status. Inversely, social injustice can lead to the enhancement of stress, the individuals are likely to behave aggressively from the point of the individual and produce a social movement from the point of view of the group. In

addition, from the results of this study, that is, individuals who have a distribution value is consistent with the government's distribution system will perceive less stress than individuals who are inconsistent. In practice, this is the reason why the system of government upholds basic political values and rules in which a person believes [45]. Meanwhile, the premise of cue theory is that underlying values and interests need to be primed to become politically salient [46]. In reality, Policy makers should convey the value which is consistent with the system to the public.

5. CONCLUSION

The present findings imply that social justice play an important role in buffering the stress among the low socioeconomic status, especially for the individuals who have a high degree preference for the merit principle. The disadvantaged with value of preference for the merit principle, faced the unfair treatment, will perceive less stress if they are provided fair treatment, for example, upward mobility through their own efforts. In addition to reporting the moderating effect of social justice on the individuals with HPMP response to stress, the findings also confirm that a significant correlation between personal's value and government policy. Individuals will perceive less stress when personal's value is consistent with the government policy than those who are not. These findings provide an important empirical evidence for political stability and social development.

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COMPETING INTERSETS

The authors have declared that no competing interest exit.

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