



## Reports

## Taking from those that have more and giving to those that have less: How inequity frames affect corrections for inequity

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## ABSTRACT

Most theories of inequity focus on *relative* inequity. In contrast, this paper provides evidence that individuals infer what people should have (i.e. an absolute standard) from the way inequity is described. In the reported experiment, participants give more to a subordinate actor when inequity is described in terms of “less than” rather than “more than,” and take more from a dominant actor when inequity is described in terms of “more than” rather than “less than,” even though the magnitude of inequity is constant. Mediation analyses suggest that these differences are driven by changes in individuals’ perceptions of what the actors should have (i.e. the standard). We conclude by discussing the implications for motivated perceptions of inequity and redistributive policy attitudes.

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## Introduction

In the United States, equity is the dominant rule of resource allocation, and thus dictates most Americans’ image of a just world (Hochschild, 1995; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). The rule of equity specifies that individuals’ outcomes should depend on their inputs (e.g. talent and effort), and the relationship between inputs and rewards should be the same across individuals (Adams, 1965; Adams & Freedman, 1976; Homans, 1962; Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1975; Walster & Walster, 1975; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). However, the rule of equity does not say how much people should have in an *absolute* sense. We argue that this focus on relative differences leaves open the question of how an inequitable world should be changed to achieve equity.

Imagine two workers, Peter and Paul, are due a bonus as a reward for their work performance. Though they performed equally well, due to a clerical error, Peter gets an eight thousand dollar bonus, but Paul gets five thousand. In this situation, equity can be created by taking three thousand from Peter or giving three thousand to Paul. An image of justice based on equity does not distinguish between these remedies. Although it is possible that individuals are indifferent to which remedy is chosen, we predict otherwise.

We suggest that people want to know whether they should take from Peter or give to Paul. This requires their image of justice to include an absolute standard (what Peter and Paul *should have*) from which they can judge the direction of the deviation from equity.

We argue that people construct such a standard to determine how to correct inequity. In many real-world instances of inequity, there is no objective standard. This reality is reflected in most psychological theories of social inequality. Theories such as social dominance theory, relative deprivation theory, equity theory, and the group-position model hypothesize that individuals perceive differences between social actors in relative terms (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Crosby, 1976; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Walster et al., 1978). From this perspective, terms like “more than” and “less than,” are two ways to describe the same thing, a relative inequity between two actors.

In contrast, we hypothesize that individuals believe that the way inequity is described provides information about an absolute standard, that is, what individuals *should* have (Chow, Lowery, & Knowles, in press; Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007; cf. Miller, Taylor, & Buck, 1991). From our perspective, although no standard actually exists, people believe that terms like “more than” imply that dominant actors have more than the standard, while terms like “less than” imply that the subordinate actors have less than the standard. Going back to Peter and Paul, if the inequity is described as Peter having three thousand more than Paul, individuals are likely to assume that Peter has more than the standard and that Paul is at the standard—i.e. that both actors should have five thousand. In contrast, if the same inequity is described as Paul having three thousand less than Peter, individuals are likely to assume that Paul has less than the standard and that Peter is at the standard—i.e. that both actors should have eight thousand. In general, we hypothesize that when an inequality between two actors is described as the dominant actor having more than the subordinate

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actor, people construct a lower standard than if the subordinate actor is described as having less than the dominant actor.

We posit that the desire to create equity should manifest as a desire to move actors closer to the standard. Because the way inequity is described affects where individuals locate the standard, we propose that individuals' corrections for inequity should depend on whether the inequity is described using the term "more than" or "less than," even when the terms denote the same relative inequity. We predict that individuals will make larger corrections for inequity when they can give or take from actors perceived to deviate from the standard, rather than giving or taking from the actors' counterpart. For example, individuals should take more from Peter if Peter is said to have more than Paul than if Paul is said to have less than Peter. Conversely, individuals should give more to Paul if Paul is said to have less than Peter, than if Peter is said to have more than Paul. The following experiment tests these hypotheses.

## Experiment

### Participants

A total of 103 participants (66 women, 37 men) ranging in age from 18 to 67 ( $M = 31.72$ ,  $SD = 9.54$ ) visited a website containing study materials. Participants were recruited from an email list maintained by a private California university of individuals interested in receiving online survey announcements. As payment, participants were entered into a drawing for a \$25 gift certificate.

### Procedure

Participants were emailed a link to the experiment website. After linking to the site and indicating consent, participants were told that the study was about problem solving skills. After reading about an organizational situation, participants were asked to complete several questionnaires. They then provided their email addresses for the gift certificate drawing.

### Manipulations and measures

#### Scenario description

All participants read the following scenario: You are a division manager at a prestigious consulting firm. It is the end of the year, and you have been contacted by the Human Resources department about a situation involving two of your analysts, George and David. George and David both worked equally hard on a project together, and the project was a great success, so you had stipulated that they should receive a sizeable, but **equal** bonus.

#### Inequity frame

Immediately following the scenario description, participants were administered the inequity frame manipulation. In the *Less than* condition, participants read that "Due to an accounting error, however, George's bonus was \$1000 less than David's." In the *More than* condition, participants read that "David's bonus was \$1000 more than George's." All participants were told that George's bonus was \$3000. Character names were counterbalanced across condition.

#### Magnitude of inequity

To measure how unfair the inequity was perceived to be, participants were asked, "How fair is this situation?" (1 = Extremely unfair, 4 = Neither fair nor unfair, 7 = Extremely fair).

#### Perceived standard

To measure participants' perceptions of what the characters were supposed to receive (i.e. the standard), they were asked,

"Both analysts were supposed to receive the same bonus. How much do you think each analyst should have received if there had been no mistake?"

#### Target

Participants were then given the ability to correct for the inequity by acting on one of the two characters. Participants in the *subordinate target* condition read that the dominant actor's bonus had already been sent, and thus, the only way they could fix the mistake would be by changing the subordinate actor's bonus. Participants in the *dominant target* condition read that the subordinate actor's bonus had already been sent, and that they could only fix the mistake by changing the dominant actor's bonus.

#### Magnitude of correction

To measure how much participants would correct for the inequity between the two characters, they were asked, "If you wanted to increase or decrease [the target]'s bonus, by how much would you change it (in dollars)?"<sup>1</sup>

## Results

### Magnitude of inequity

It is possible that how inequity is described affects individuals' perceptions of the magnitude of inequity. To test this possibility, we conducted an independent samples *t*-test on participants' perceptions of the unfairness of the inequity across inequity frame conditions. Participants did not report a significant difference in perceived unfairness between the *less than* condition ( $M = 1.74$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) and the *more than* condition ( $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ),  $t(101) = 1.66$ ,  $p = .10$ .

### Perceived standard

We hypothesize that how much individuals think the actors should have (i.e. the standard) is affected by the way inequity is described, and that inequity described as "more than" connotes a lower standard than the same inequity described as "less than." To test this hypothesis, we conducted an independent samples *t*-test on participants' perceptions of the standard across inequity frame conditions. As predicted, participants had a significantly higher estimation of what the two workers should have received in the *less than* condition ( $M = 3594.83$ ,  $SD = 330.56$ ), than in the *more than* condition ( $M = 3388.89$ ,  $SD = 335.22$ ),  $t(101) = 3.12$ ,  $p < .01$ .

### Magnitude of correction

We predicted that when participants could only correct for the inequity by taking away from the dominant actor, they would make a larger correction when they perceived the dominant actor to have more, as compared to when they perceived the subordinate actor to have less. We also predicted that when the correction involved giving to a subordinate actor, participants would make a larger correction when they perceived the subordinate actor to have less, as compared to when they perceived the dominant actor to have more. To test these predictions, we conducted a 2 (Inequity frame: More than, Less than)  $\times$  2 (Target: Subordinate, Dominant) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the magnitude of correction for the inequity.

<sup>1</sup> Participants were asked whether they wanted to increase, decrease, or not change the bonus before providing the dollar amount of the correction. Participants never took from the subordinate actor or gave to the dominant actor. Thus, for simplicity, we report the absolute magnitude of the corrections.

There was no main effect of Inequity frame or Target,  $F_s < 1$ . However, as predicted, there was a significant interaction between inequity frame and target,  $F(1,99) = 14.46, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .13$ , see Fig. 1.

Closer examination of the interaction revealed that participants who corrected for the inequity by acting on the dominant actor's bonus made a significantly larger correction when told the dominant actor had more ( $M = 947.37, SD = 229.42$ ), than when told the subordinate actor had less ( $M = 700.00, SD = 381.88$ ),  $t(99) = 2.55, p < .05$ . In contrast, participants who could only correct for the inequity by changing the subordinate actor's bonus, made a significantly larger correction when told the subordinate actor had less ( $M = 969.70, SD = 174.08$ ), than when told the dominant actor had more ( $M = 730.77, SD = 429.67$ ),  $t(99) = 2.86, p < .05$ .

We also predicted that the more individuals perceived the actor they could act on to deviate from the standard, the larger their corrections for inequity would be. Thus, we expected that individuals who acted on a dominant target would make a larger correction the lower they perceived the standard to be. In contrast, we predicted that individuals who acted on a subordinate target would make a larger correction the higher they perceived the standard to be. Statistically, this amounts to a Target  $\times$  Standard interaction on the magnitude of correction.

To test this hypothesis, we mean-centered participants' perceptions of the standard and effects coded Target condition (1 = dominant target, -1 = subordinate target). We then computed an interaction term by multiplying the recoded target variable with the mean-centered standard variable (Aiken and West, 1999). We regressed magnitude of correction on Target, the mean-centered Standard, and the interaction term. There was no main effect of Target or Standard,  $t_s < 1$ . However, as predicted, there was a significant Target  $\times$  Standard interaction on the magnitude of correction,  $B = -.35, SE B = .09, \beta = -.36, t(99) = 3.82, p < .001$ , see Fig. 2.

A closer examination of the interaction revealed that among individuals who acted on the dominant actor, the lower they perceived the standard to be, the more they took from the dominant actor,  $B = -.32, SE B = .13, \beta = -.33, t(99) = 2.44, p < .05$ . In contrast, among individuals who acted on the subordinate actor, the higher they perceived the standard to be, the more they gave to the subordinate actor,  $B = .38, SE B = .13, \beta = .39, t(99) = 2.97, p < .001$ .

**Mediational analysis**

According to our model, the way inequity is described should affect the perceived standard—i.e. what they think the actors should have received. This perception of the standard should, in turn, affect how much they will correct for the inequity, depending on whom they could act. Statistically, then, we predicted that the perceived standard would mediate the relationship between Inequity frame, Target, and magnitude of correction. This amounts to

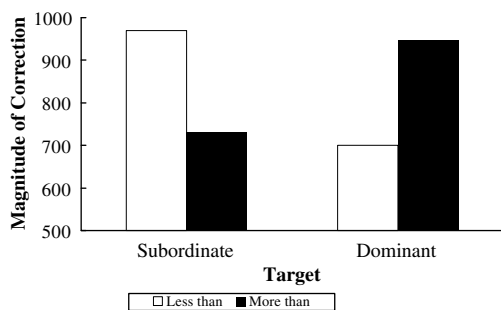


Fig. 1. Magnitude of correction as a function of inequity frame and Target.

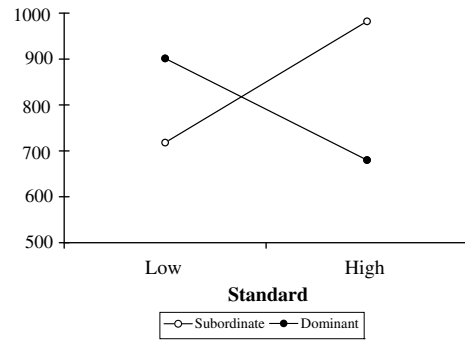


Fig. 2. Magnitude of correction as a function of Target and standard.

mediated moderation (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005), where the Inequity frame  $\times$  Target interaction on magnitude of correction would be mediated by the Target  $\times$  Standard interaction. To conduct such an analysis, the independent variable (Inequity frame  $\times$  Target) and mediator (Target  $\times$  Standard) must both significantly predict the dependent variable (magnitude of correction), and Inequity frame must significantly affect Standard. As described above, these criteria were met.

We regressed participants' magnitude of correction on Inequity frame, Target, and their interaction term, controlling for the effects of the perceived standard, and the Target  $\times$  Standard interaction. In this analysis, the predictive power of the Inequity frame  $\times$  Target effect on magnitude of correction dropped, while the Target  $\times$  Standard interaction remained significant (see Fig. 3). A Sobel test indicated that the drop in predictive power was significant,  $z = 2.12, p < .05$ .

**General discussion**

The present experiment found that the way inequity was described affected individuals' perception of how much the actors should have had, which in turn affected the magnitude of their corrections for inequity. Individuals take away more resources from a dominant actor to correct for inequity described using the term "more than," than the same inequity described using the term "less than." Similarly, individuals give more resources to a subordinate actor to correct for inequity described using the term "less than," than the same inequity described using the term "more than."

Importantly, the words "more" and "less" only denote relative differences. If a dominant actor has more than a subordinate actor, it must also be true that the subordinate actor has the same amount less than the dominant actor. Furthermore, the words "more" and "less" do not provide information regarding the amount of resources actors should have. Nonetheless, it appears

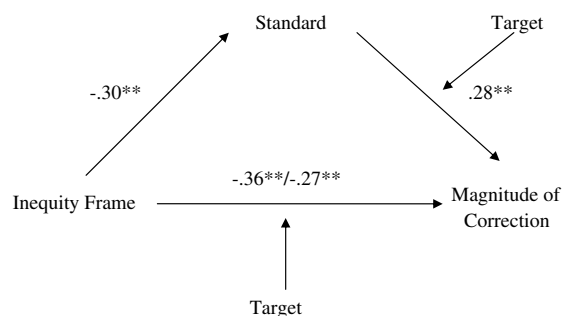


Fig. 3. Effect of the Inequity sframe  $\times$  Target on magnitude of correction, controlling for the effect of the Target  $\times$  Standard interaction.

that people understand these words to suggest the location of an absolute standard.

It could be argued that the present results reflect an artifact of language use. It might be that people assume that the word chosen to describe inequity must be meant to communicate something (Grice, 1989), and that the something is what we have labeled a standard. We believe that if such a norm of communication exists, its existence reflects the psychology that underpins the way individuals understand inequity. We posit that the existence of a standard helps people make sense of inequity. This causes them to search for clues to help locate the standard, and the language used to describe inequity is understood to provide such a clue. Thus, we believe that the way individuals interpret the language used to describe inequity reflects the desire to understand both one's own and others' place in unequal systems.

The desire to understand one's place in an unequal system might also lead to motivated perceptions of the standard. Given that inequity frame can affect resource distribution; self- or group-interest might affect individuals' preference for one frame or another. For example, dominant individuals or groups might believe that they are more likely to hold on to resources if inequity is described as their competitors' disadvantage, and thus prefer this frame. Ironically, subordinate individuals or groups might have the same preference, believing that they are more likely to be given resources if inequity is described as their disadvantage. Although there is some evidence for these preferences (e.g. Lowery et al., 2007; Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005), further research is necessary to determine if the motivation that we describe contributes to them.

Our story shares two important features with prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979); we posit the existence of a standard and sensitivity to the way information is framed. Despite these similarities, our account differs from prospect theory in at least three ways. First, in prospect theory, equivalent frames describe one outcome in terms of a gain or loss. In our story, each frame describes two outcomes, those of the advantaged and disadvantaged actor. Second, we do not hypothesize that either of our frames loom larger than the other in terms of the perceived magnitude of inequity. Consistent with our perspective, participants in the reported experiment perceived the same amount of unfairness in both frames. Moreover, even if one inequity frame was perceived as more inequitable than the other, this could not account for the observed interaction effect; it could only account for a main effect of inequity frame on the magnitude of participants' corrections. However, we found that the magnitude of participants' corrections depended on both inequity frame and which actor (dominant or subordinate) they acted on. Third, we imbue the standard with a moral quality not present in prospect theory. We hypothesize that individuals believe that justice requires actors to occupy the standard, and thus prefer to correct inequity in a manner perceived to move actors closer to the standard.

The effects described in this paper might have important policy implications. If social inequity is described in terms of women, minorities, or the poor having less than men, Whites, or the rich, people might support policies perceived to help these groups, but balk when the same policies are perceived to harm dominant groups. They might sincerely believe it would be unjust to harm

members of dominant groups in response to evidence of discrimination against members of subordinate groups (cf. Lowery, Unzueta, Knowles, & Goff, 2006). However, to the extent that dominant-group advantages are tied to subordinate-group disadvantages, the reluctance to "harm" dominant groups is the same as an unwillingness to help subordinate groups.

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