



A Study Based on the Chinese Distribution System: Social Justice, Merit Principle Preference and Stress in Low-socioeconomic-Status Groups

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between all authors. Author YZ and LC designed the study, wrote the protocol and supervised the work. Authors YZ and LC carried out all laboratories work and performed the statistical analysis. Authors YZ and LC managed the analyses of the study. Author LC wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author YZ managed the literature searches and edited the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigates whether social justice has a positive effect on individuals of low socioeconomic status who have a high preference for the merit principle. We used the Merit Principle Scale and the Social Class Scale to assign the study's low-socioeconomic-status participants into two groups: those with a high preference for the merit principle (HPMP), and those with a low preference for the merit principle (LPMP). A total of 72 undergraduates of low socioeconomic status at Southwest University participated in this research. They included two samples: participants who identified themselves as having HPMP (11 men, 25 women) and those with LPMP (14 men, 22 women). The participants were randomly assigned to either a social-justice

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condition or a social-injustice condition. In the social-justice condition, participants read an article describing society as fair; in the social-injustice condition, they read an article emphasising that society is unfair. The results showed that social justice can reduce participants' stress, and that individuals with HPMP felt more stress than individuals with LPMP in the socially-unjust condition. In addition, a significant correlation was found between a person's value of preference for the merit principle and the government's just-distribution policy. Individuals will perceive less stress when their values concerning distribution principles are consistent with the distribution system that society is implementing. In contrast, individuals will have more stress when their value of preference for merit is not consistent with the government's distribution system. Social justice can successfully buffer the stress experienced among those of low socioeconomic status, especially in individuals who have a high degree of preference for the merit principle. Individuals will perceive less stress when their personal values are consistent with government policy than when they are not.

Keywords: Social justice; injustice; value of preference merit principle; perceived stress; socioeconomic status; distribution system.

1. INTRODUCTION

Political economists and social psychologists have devoted much attention to distributive justice. Political economists agree that a trade-off exists between efficiency and equality [1]. On one hand, in a previous study on social justice, Okun [1] argued that a society's living standards and material wealth reflect a system of rewards and penalties intended to encourage effort and to channel it into socially productive activity, therefore generating an efficient economy. However, to create efficiency would also create inequalities and reduce regulation and taxation, translating 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 lead to social divisions and may motivate the poor to engage in illegal activities and riots [3]. Persson and Tabellini [4] also found a statistically significant and quantitatively important negative relationship between inequality and economic growth. 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 determine how much efficiency or equality a society is willing to choose. Boulding [6] argued that societies continually compromise between efficiency and equality. He claimed that people prefer a distribution of rewards based on merit; to avoid alienating the disadvantaged, however, people are inclined to favor redistribution to meet

basic needs and to provide opportunities for gaining self-reliance. In the present study, we focus on Boulding's propositions. This proposal is consistent with the Chinese government's system in that efficiency and equality are both emphasised in the initial distribution and redistribution, and equality is more important than efficiency in redistribution.

1.1 Social Stratification and the 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, people 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 have completely different reactions to inequality. The first of these viewpoints is the "conservative thesis", in which one is essentially supportive of the status quo, viewing the existing distribution of rewards as just, equitable and frequently also inevitable; the second viewpoint is the "radical antithesis", in which one is highly critical, denouncing the distributive system as basically unjust and unnecessary [8]. In the current study, we explore which kind of response will be given by individuals after an experience of inequality.

Chinese social stratification and social mobility have been fast-growing since China's post-1978 economic reforms. Parish [9] argues that before 1978, Mao's egalitarianism effectively reduced socioeconomic inequalities. However, only a tiny

fraction of the rural population had a chance to “move up” to cities through military mobilization, marriage, education and job assignments [10] because of the rigid household registration institution and *hukou*, which restricted all Chinese to their place of birth for their entire lifetimes [11]. In the twenty-first century, economic growth and the resulting structural changes may lead to a change in the distribution of power and opportunity [12]. In any society, there is a tendency for privileged groups to attempt to close ranks in order to preserve their own advantages and to pass those advantages on to their children, but this may curb social justice and reduce economic efficiency [13]. In this paper, class mobility plays an important role in social justice and the next experimental manipulation will involve class mobility.

Social stratification itself implies inequality [8], and the share of resources differs significantly among social classes. Realistic group conflict theory indicates that conflicts of interest result in intense dislike and negative feelings between groups [14], especially for the disadvantaged. Due to their lack of resources and low status in society, individuals of 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 unfair treatment. 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 devalued academic performance among African American college students [17].

The 16th National Congress of Communist Party of China established 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 concerning 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 an endeavour [18]. This principle has been found to guide resource-sharing even in preschoolers [18]. Meritocracy is considered an ideal justice principle because it considers only relevant inputs (e.g., abilities) and 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 a distribution system, preference for the merit principle as a value has salient differences among individuals. Individuals with HPMP report stronger feelings of unfairness toward an unjust hiring decision than do individuals with LPMP [19], and individuals with HPMP have more negative reactions about programs that violate distributive justice than do individuals with LPMP [20]. Therefore, we speculated that individuals from low-socioeconomic-status groups who have HPMP may feel more stress than individuals with LPMP in an unjust society.

The social environment, including factors 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 [21], the reason for this is that individuals feel resentment when outcomes are unfair, and they will try to restore equity. Under socially just circumstances, people are inclined to have a grateful attitude toward society; however, they readily show negative emotional reactions (e.g., anger, fear, anxiety) when they believe that social injustice prevails [25]. Based on this, we suspected that social justice may operate as a buffer against negative feelings and behaviours.

Therefore, in the framework of the Chinese governmental policy of social distribution, the circumstances of social stratification in China and the personal preferences for distribution values among those of low socioeconomic status, we try to explore whether social justice has a positive effect on individuals of low socioeconomic status, especially those with HPMP. This study may be

used to buffer conflict between those of low status and those of high status. We proposed some hypotheses as follows.

1.3 Hypotheses

The frameworks for creating good relationships between high-status and low-status groups have important psychological and social implications. According to self-categorization theory, individuals can categorize themselves at either the individual or the group level of inclusiveness [26]. When an individual categorizes himself at the group level and the in-group is associated with inequitable treatment of the out-group, the door is opened for collective guilt to be experienced [27]. We can infer that individuals of low socioeconomic status who are treated inequitably will have a series of negative feelings, because this kind of injustice further aggravates their disadvantages. In this study, the main objective was to investigate whether social justice has a positive effect on individuals of low socioeconomic status who have HPMP. We further analyzed the relationship between social justice, preference for the merit principle and perceived stress. We introduced the following hypotheses. Firstly, we hypothesized that social justice would effectively reduce the feeling of stress among individuals with HPMP who have low socioeconomic status, but not for those with LPMP. Secondly, individuals who have distribution values consistent with the government's just-distribution system will experience less stress than individuals whose values are inconsistent with this system. Thirdly, we hypothesized that there is a significant correlation between negative affect and stress after individuals experience unfair treatment.

2. METHODS

2.1 Overview

Our study focused on the group with low socioeconomic status, using a questionnaire to screen subjects. In addition, we determined the value of preference for the merit principle, using scales. Next, subjects were randomly assigned to different conditions (social justice or social injustice) and we explored whether there was an 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 distributed 400

questionnaires to college students for screening and 366 were returned, a response rate of 91.5%.

A total of 72 undergraduates of low socioeconomic status at Southwest University participated in this research. They included two groups: Participants who identified themselves as having HPMP (11 men, 25 women; mean age = 20.56 ± 1.38 years) and those having LPMP (14 men, 22 women; mean age = 20.34 ± 1.20 years). The participants were randomly assigned to either a social-justice condition or a social-injustice condition. One participant's data was excluded from the analysis because he did not believe the experimental manipulation.

This study received permission from the Academic Board of Southwest University.

2.3 Procedure

In step one, participants completed the Preference for Merit Principle (PMP) Scale, which was adapted from previous studies [19], and the Social Class Scale [28]. The PMP scale includes two subscales: the prescriptive beliefs scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.71$) and the descriptive beliefs scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$). Both of the subscales consist 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 PMP. Two subgroups were identified: those with HPMP (individuals at the top 27 percent of PMP) and those with LPMP (individuals at the lowest 27 percent of PMP). According to Lu (2003), the Social Class Scale includes the participants' parents' levels of education, types of profession and average monthly income [28]. Participants who have a lower mean score have a lower socioeconomic status. In addition, participants were asked to report their demographic information.

In step two, participants went individually into a room where they were told that they would take part in a study investigating the reading comprehension of college students. Next, participants were asked to carefully read one of two fabricated newspaper articles. In the social-justice condition, the article described society as being fair. For example, it emphasised the construction and maintenance of social fairness

and the justice system, and that individuals of low socioeconomic status can get ahead in life if they work hard enough. In the social-injustice condition, the article emphasised that society is unfair, that the allocation of social resources is extremely unreasonable, and that individuals in low-socioeconomic-level groups cannot get ahead in life even if they work hard.

In step three, participants were asked to complete a stress questionnaire adapted from previous studies [29]. The scale consisted of two items: "To what extent do you feel stressed about the article?" and "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 $\alpha = 0.72$), with higher scores indicating higher degrees of stress. Next, participants completed the Negative Affect Subscale (adopted from PANAS [30]), a 10-item self-report measuring current emotional state, including items assessing negative affect (e.g., irritable, ashamed). The questions were answered on a 5-point scale from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much, and the subscale of the negative affect had a high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$), with higher scores indicating more negative emotion.

2.4 Manipulation Checks

At the end of the study, participants rated the degree to which they had 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 scale, 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 analysis of variance (ANOVA) as a function of condition. The result confirmed that participants had a stronger feeling of unfairness ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.20$) in the unjust condition than did participants in the just condition ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.2$), $F(1, 70) = 31.98$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.32$. This result indicated that our experimental manipulation was effective.

Across the two experimental conditions, there was no significant difference between gender

types in their response to stress, $F(1, 70) < 1$, ns.

3.2 Hypothesis Testing

The stress scores were analyzed using a 2 x 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, $F(1, 70) = 20.56$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.24$, 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 x preference for the merit principle interaction was significant, $F(1, 70) = 8.57$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.11$. Subsequent analyses of the simple effects showed that participants with HPMP felt more stress under the unjust condition ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.51$) than participants under the just condition ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.33$), $F(1, 35) = 22.57$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.40$. 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 LPMP, $F(1, 34) = 1.72$, $p = 0.20$ (see Fig. 1). The results support our hypothesis concerning the moderating effect of social justice on individuals with HPMP in their response to stress. The main effect of preference for the merit principle was not significant, $F(1, 70) = 0.033$, $p = 0.86$.

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, $F(1, 35) = 6.78$, $p = 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.17$. 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 Fig. 2). This result also confirms our previous assumption that individuals will have less stress when their value of PMP is consistent with the government's just distribution system. In contrast, individuals will feel more stress when their value of preference for 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, $r = 0.32$, $p = 0.055$.

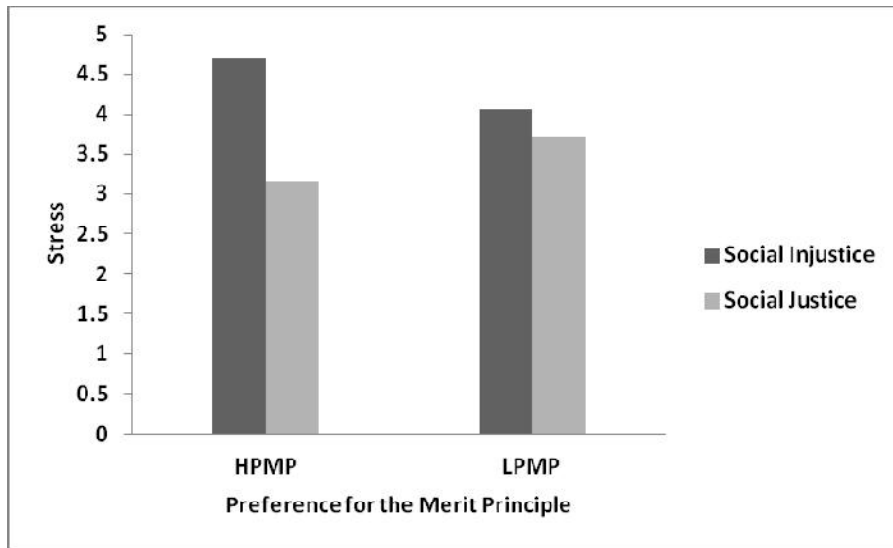


Fig. 1. Participants' stress as a function of the social environment (injustice/justice) and preference for the merit principle (HPMP/LPMP)

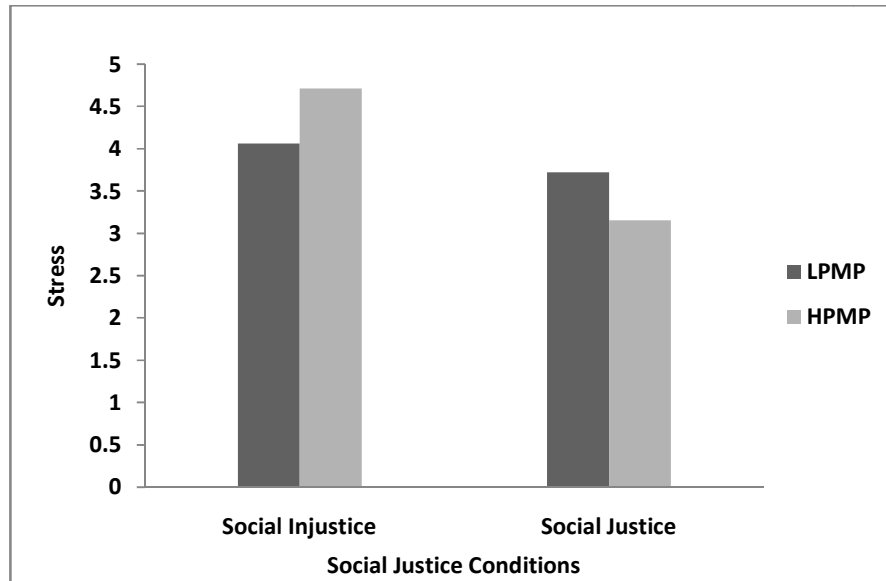


Fig. 2. The extent of consistency between the value of PMP and government's just-distribution system

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

4. DISCUSSION

In this paper, according to the system of just distribution in China, we manipulate different social environments in a laboratory, focusing on social justice and social injustice. The findings showed that participants of low socioeconomic status felt less stress than their counterparts in

the social-justice condition compared to 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 [32] also showed that stigmatized group members have a higher prevalence of

psychiatric disorders than their dominant counterparts.

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether the link between PMP 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 condition than those under the social-justice condition. However, there is no significant difference among participants with LPMP based on whether they read an article about equitability or one about inequity. As mentioned above, individuals of low economic status are often treated more harshly than individuals of high economic status [15]. Ego-defence theories emphasize that members of disadvantaged groups will construe their social outcomes in ways that enable them to buffer their personal self-esteem from threat [33]. Therefore, we suspect that when individuals with LPMP face an unjust circumstance, they tend to discount the personal diagnostic of negative outcomes in order to protect themselves from the threat [34]; individuals with LPMP see social injustice as legitimate. The psychological theory of system justification argues that individuals believe in the process by which existing social arrangements are legitimized, even at the expense of personal and group interests [35]. Zinn [36] noted that rebellion has been only an occasional reaction to suffering in human history, and that, rather, the inclination of people faced with an overwhelming environment is to submit to it. For example, African American participants generally accepted unfavourable stereotypes of their own group as lazy, irresponsible and violent [37]. A striking example of the depressed-entitlement effect is that, relative to men, women typically pay themselves less for the same labour [38]. In contrast, 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 subordinate groups first seek to escape the implications of this group membership by exercising individual exit and mobility options [40]. These results seem to echo our introductory discussion, namely that there are completely different reactions toward inequality between individuals with HPMP (radical antithesis) and LPMP (conservative thesis) among those of low socioeconomic status.

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

Although there is a significant positive correlation between feelings of stress and negative emotions, it is unclear from the present results whether stress is a mediating factor in negative emotions under the social-justice condition among those of low socioeconomic status. Research has found that poorer African Americans are more likely to report unfair treatment than African Americans of moderate income [44]. In this process, they readily show negative emotional reactions (e.g., anger, fear, anxiety) under unjust circumstances [25] in order to reduce the stress resulting from unfair treatment, and the low-socioeconomic-status group may try to obtain more social resources, thus perceiving less negative emotion.

The present research has important practical implications in political psychology and political science. Specifically, this research innovatively found that social justice could successfully buffer feelings of stress among participants with 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 HPMP felt less stress under the just condition than 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, as individuals are likely to behave aggressively from the point of view of the individual and to produce a social movement from the point of view of the group. In addition, this study shows that individuals with a distribution value consistent with the government's distribution system will perceive less stress than will individuals with values inconsistent with the system. In practice, this is the reason the system of government upholds basic political values and rules, in which people believe [45]. Meanwhile, the premise of cue theory is that underlying values and interests must be primed to become politically salient [46]. In reality, policy-makers should convey to the public the value that is consistent with the system.

5. CONCLUSION

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

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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