The automatic activation of (un)fairness behavior in organizations

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ABSTRACT

We conducted a high impact, laboratory experiment to examine the possibility that the enactment of (un)fairness behavior can be influenced by non-conscious processes. In Phase 1, participants completed an impression formation task in which they read a description of a fair and an unfair leader. The descriptions also included photographs of each leader. Later, we subliminally exposed participants to either the face of the fair leader, the face of the unfair leader, or a neutral face. In Phase 2, under the guise of an unrelated study, participants assumed the role of a manager and wrote a letter communicating a dismissal decision to a subordinate. The results demonstrate that participants were significantly less interactionally fair when communicating the dismissal decision after being subliminally exposed to the face of a leader whom they had mentally associated with unfairness, as compared to either the face of a leader they associated with fairness or the neutral face. The data suggest that people's enactment of fairness toward a third-party can be influenced by their mental representation of the unfairness of a salient other via automatic, non-conscious cognitive processes. We highlight the implications of our conceptual approach and current findings for theorizing on justice and on leadership, as well as for the study of organizational behavior more broadly. We also discuss several possible negative implications for organizations.

1. Introduction

Most theories of organizational behavior assume that human cognitive, motivational, and emotional processes are explicit—that is, that these processes are under people's conscious control. A large body of evidence from experimental social–cognitive psychology has however now demonstrated that many of people's attitudes, goals, emotions, and motivations are due to automatic, unconscious influences (e.g., for reviews, see Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Chartrand, Dalton, & Cheng, 2007). In light of ample evidence demonstrating the influence of implicit processes, organizational scholars have recently begun to question the assumption that organizational members' decisions and behaviors are necessarily consciously controlled (e.g., George, 2009; Lane & Scott, 2007; Locke & Latham, 2004). As well, organizational researchers have begun to incorporate implicit processing in theorizing on such topics as ethical decision making (Reynolds, 2006; Reynolds, Leavitt, & DeCelles, 2010), affect (Barsade, Ramarajan, & Westen, 2009), goals (Latham, Stajkovic, & Locke, 2010), and leadership (e.g., Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001).

In the current paper, we examine the influence of implicit processes on another important work concept: organizational justice. In particular, we focus on the influence of automatic, non-conscious processes on the enactment of justice. In the next sections, we first review the concept of organizational justice, as well as prior research and theorizing on organizational justice and implicit processing. We then discuss theory and research from social–cognitive psychology demonstrating unconscious influences of social behavior, which serves as the theoretical basis for our research. Finally, we derive our primary hypothesis.

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2. Theoretical background

Organizational justice refers to people's perceptions of fairness in a work setting (see Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005). Researchers have distinguished several facets of organizational justice, which include distributive justice (i.e., perceived fairness of the distribution of resources), procedural justice (i.e., perceived fairness of the procedures used to make decisions), and interactional justice (i.e., perceived fairness of the interpersonal treatment received during the execution and communication of decisions; for further distinctions see Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan, 2005; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). A large volume of research has demonstrated that there are numerous important consequences of justice perceptions for work attitudes and behaviors (for meta-analyses, see Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). In short, justice matters for employees and for organizations as a whole.

To date, much of the theoretical and empirical research on organizational justice has assumed that employees' justice judgments are formed consciously and deliberately, and that reactions to injustice involve awareness and control. More recently, several theoretical perspectives on justice have recognized that justice judgments are not always formed deliberately (e.g., Bobocel, McCline, & Folger, 1997; Folger, Cropanzano, & Goldman, 2005; Lerner, 2003; Lind, 2001; Van den Bos, Lind, & Wilke, 2001). For example, fairness heuristic theory (Lind, 2001; Van den Bos et al., 2001) argues that employees can form judgments about the fairness of organizational authorities via heuristic processing rather than by deliberate reasoning. Once formed, the fairness heuristic can be stored and accessed in the future as a guide to regulate one's behavior. The theory also postulates that once fairness judgments are made, they are highly resistant to change in response to subsequent fairness-relevant information (Lind, Kray, & Thompson, 2001). The deontic model of justice (Folger et al., 2005) proposes that people automatically perceive and respond to justice events. In particular, the model stipulates that people automatically experience moral unease when they observe injustice, motivating them to respond to the injustice, even when it doing so is of no personal benefit.

Empirical research examining implicit organizational justice processes is accruing. For example, Johnson and Steinman (2009) found that participants who were treated fairly (vs. unfairly) reported stronger explicit and implicit levels of motivation (i.e., promotion focus). Likewise, Johnson and Lord (2010) found that organizational justice activates self-identity both explicitly and implicitly, and that self-identity activation mediates the effect of justice on trust, cooperation, and counterproductive behavior. Other work has shown that different justice dimensions (i.e., distributive, procedural, interactional) are more or less influential in shaping employees' work attitudes, depending on whether the individual, relational or collective self-concept is primed (Johnson, Selenta, & Lord, 2006). In other organizational research, Ritter, Fischbein, and Lord (2005) found that minority status predicts implicit (but not explicit) injustice expectations, such that minorities were more likely to expect unfair treatment from a manager than non-minorities, regardless of manager race. Skarlicki and Rupp (2010) found that following an injustice, third-parties reported greater retributive intentions when they were instructed to engage in experiential (i.e., unconscious) processing, as compared to when they were instructed to engage in rational (i.e., deliberate) processing.

In the current paper, we build on this growing body of research and offer a new perspective on the study of implicit organizational justice processes. We suggest that whether an organizational authority treats an employee fairly or unfairly can be influenced by factors outside of their conscious awareness. Below, we present theory and research from social–cognitive psychology that serves as the basis for our research.

2.1. Automatic activation of goals and behaviors

Bargh's (1990) auto-motive model argues that goals can be activated and pursued unconsciously to influence perceptions and behaviors. According to this model, goals and intents are stored in memory in the same way as other cognitive constructs, such as stereotypes and schemas (e.g., Bargh, 1990, 1994; Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Tro̎tschel, 2001; Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Higgins, 1996). If a goal is activated and acted on repeatedly and consistently in a given situation, this situation acquires the potential to trigger the goal automatically. Once activated, the non-conscious goal is hypothesized to operate without conscious thought to influence perceptions and behaviors.

The auto-motive model has received considerable empirical support. For example, Bargh et al. (2001) assessed the activation of achievement and cooperation goals after study participants had been exposed implicitly to words related to high performance or cooperation. As expected, exposure to such words (relevant to particular goals) resulted in pursuit of the corresponding goals (e.g., performing better on an intellectual task after exposure to high-performance words). Other work has examined the non-conscious activation of impression-formation and memorization goals (Chartrand & Bargh, 1996). When these goals were primed, participants processed information in a goal-consistent manner without awareness of the influence these goals had on their processing, replicating previous research in which the goals had been given to participants explicitly through experimental instructions (e.g., Hamilton, Katz, & Leirer, 1980).

Can other people act as triggers of goals, causing the perceiver to unconsciously initiate goal pursuits? Several theoretical frameworks suggest that people's cognitive or mental representations of others can indeed be automatically activated, unconsciously influencing emotion, motivation, and behavior (e.g., Andersen & Cole, 1990; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Baldwin, 1992; Chen, 2001; Holmes, 2000; Miller & Read, 1991; Planalp, 1987). For example, Baldwin (1992) theorized that as relationships develop, people construct relational schemas, which are "cognitive structures representing regularities in patterns of interpersonal relatedness" (p. 461). Once people develop cognitive representations of significant others and their relationships with them, activation of the relational representation can trigger goals and behaviors to which they are closely associated, outside of awareness.

In line with this reasoning, Fitzsimons and Bargh (2003) and Shah (2003) found that relationship goals become automatically activated when specific relationships are primed. In the Fitzsimons and Bargh (2003) study, participants were instructed to reflect upon someone in their lives (e.g., best friend, parent, and co-worker). Subsequently, individuals were more likely to pursue goals that they associate with the person about whom they reflected. After they described their mother, for example, participants often acted more diligently and conscientiously. Similarly, Shah (2003) found that individuals showed more persistence on various tests of intelligence (e.g., verbal fluency and analytical reasoning), after the name of a friend or relative, who values such aspects of intelligence, was presented subliminally. Moreover, meditation analyses demonstrated that these priming effects occur because exposure to a significant other activates the goals they value. Likewise, Leander, Shah, and Chartrand (2009) demonstrated that participants reported a stronger temptation to abstain from drugs after they were subliminally exposed to the name of someone they knew, who also abstained from drugs. Other research by Huang and Murnighan (2010) showed that individuals' exhibit greater trusting behavior when the names of either trusted or liked people are subliminally activated. Together, these studies show that goal-directed behavior can be automatically triggered by relevant situational features and by other people, outside people's conscious awareness.

Drawing on the above findings, we focus on the potential that an organizational leader has to unconsciously influence employees' enactment of justice toward a third-party. As has been argued elsewhere (Lord & Brown, 2004), leaders are a prominent feature in the organization, given their status, and their power to control rewards and feedback. Thus, leaders' values, goals, and behaviors are likely to be salient to organizational members. According to Lord and Brown, leaders thus can serve as a potent psychological "prime" in the organization. In support of this idea, Brown (2000) showed that activating the image of an individual's supervisor (through a visualization task) directly influenced the individual's self-esteem.

1.2. The current research

Although organizational justice is a multidimensional construct, in the current research, we examine implicit influences on how people enact *interactional justice* (vs. procedural or distributive justice). Unlike the implementation of procedural justice and distributive justice, which are often determined by formal policy, the enactment of interactional justice is less constrained and therefore more open to influence by forces within the person. Thus, we reasoned that the enactment of interactional justice may be most susceptible to non-conscious influences, and therefore we focus on this facet of fairness for practical reasons.

As an initial test of our hypothesis, we conducted a high impact experiment in the laboratory. Our aim was to maximize experimental control and thus internal validity (e.g., Dobbins, Lane, & Steiner, 1988) in order to make firmer conclusions regarding causality. As recommended by Mook (1983), our initial interest is in determining whether our predicted effects *can* occur (vs. *do* occur in the field); thus, internal validity was deemed of primary importance (Dobbins et al., 1988; Highhouse, 2009; Locke, 1986).

Given our laboratory environment, in Phase 1 of the study, we needed participants to associate either fairness or unfairness behaviors with a leader. To do this, participants first completed an impression formation task, in which they read a description of a fair and an unfair leader. The leader descriptions referred to a variety of fairness-related behaviors, allowing participants to form a global judgment of leader (un)fairness (e.g., Ambrose & Schminke, 2009). The descriptions also included photographs of each leader. We later primed participants with leader fairness or unfairness by subliminally exposing them either to the fair leader's face, to the unfair leader's face, or to a neutral face. Prior research has demonstrated that such visual primes are effective in activating people's stored mental representations of others. For example, Baldwin, Carrell, and Lopez (1990) found that Roman Catholic participants who were subliminally primed with a photograph of Pope John Paul II (a personally significant other to Roman Catholics) had lower self-evaluation ratings after reading a passage on sexual dreams as compared those primed with a photograph of Robert Zajonc (an unfamiliar other to participants).

Under the guise of an unrelated study, participants then assumed the role of a manager and wrote a letter communicating a dismissal decision to a subordinate. We operationalized interactional justice as the number of explanations and interpersonally sensitive remarks made by participants in their dismissal letter (Bies, 2005; Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg, 1993). Drawing on the social–cognitive psychology findings reviewed earlier, we expected that priming participants with the face of the unfair leader would activate the concept of unfairness, causing them to be less interactionally fair when communicating the dismissal decision in writing, as compared to when participants are primed with either the face of the fair leader or the neutral face. In contrast, priming participants with the face of the fair leader should activate the concept of fairness, resulting in greater interactional fairness, as compared to when participants are primed with either the face of the unfair leader or the neutral face.

The present research makes several contributions to the organizational justice literature. First, it builds on recent research that demonstrates a mediating role of implicit processes in the relation between perceptions of justice and work attitudes (e.g., Johnson & Lord, 2010; Johnson & Steinman, 2009) by examining the causal influence of implicit processes on the enactment of justice. In doing so, the research also contributes to the sparse literature examining antecedents of justice behavior. Although calls for research on "fairness as a dependent variable" have been made over ten years ago (p. 97, Folger & Skarlicki, 2001; Korsgaard, Roberson, & Rymph, 1998) only recently have researchers begun to do so systematically (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005; Patient & Skarlicki, 2010; Scott, Colquitt, & Paddock, 2009; Scott, Colquitt, & Zapata-Phelan, 2007). To our knowledge, we are the first to examine the possibility that people's enactment of justice can be influenced by unconscious processes.

Second, our conceptual approach extends fairness heuristic theory (Lind, 2001; Lind et al., 2001; Van den Bos et al., 2001) and the deontic model of justice (Folger et al., 2005). Both theories argue that people can form fairness judgments of an organizational authority (e.g., leader) without conscious awareness. We extend this idea by suggesting that once people associate (un)fairness with a leader, this association can in turn unknowingly influence their own fairness toward others. Thus, whereas fairness

heuristic theory and the deontic model focus on the role of implicit processes in the formation of a fairness judgment, we focus on the role of implicit processes in people's enactment of fairness toward others.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and design

One hundred and twenty-six undergraduate psychology students participated for course credit. Forty-nine percent of the sample was male, and average age was 21 years ($SD = 1.73$). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: unfair leader prime vs. fair leader prime vs. neutral prime.

3.2. Procedure

A random sample of participants was invited by email to participate in what they believed were two unrelated studies. Participants signed a separate informed consent form for each phase to bolster our cover story.

3.2.1. Phase 1
Participants were told that for the purported Study 1, they would complete three tasks to investigate how people perceive other people, words, and everyday objects. The actual purpose of this phase was to create our "prime" — that is, we needed participants to associate either fairness or unfairness with a leader, so that we could later subliminally expose them to the leader's face. To create our prime, participants completed an impression formation task, in which they read short descriptions about a fair and unfair leader. Both leaders were male (identified as "Tom" and "Bob") and were said to be managers of a medium-sized manufacturing company for the past five years, managing a team of six employees. The description sheets also contained photographs of the leaders, which would later serve as our subliminal prime.

Leader fairness was manipulated in the description by varying six specific on-the-job behaviors. The fair leader was described as having engaged in six behaviors, which based on the justice literature met important fairness criteria (e.g., Colquitt, 2001): facilitation of voice, bias suppression in decision-making, consideration of input, consideration of merit in decision-making, sensitivity in communication, and providing an explanation for a decision. The unfair leader was described as having engaged in six behaviors that violated these same criteria. The photographs of the leaders (named Bob and Tom) and fairness behaviors were counterbalanced, such that for half of the participants, Bob was the unfair leader and Tom the fair leader; for the other half, Tom was the unfair leader and Bob was the fair leader. Cross-cutting this variation, we also counterbalanced the order in which participants received the two descriptions: half of the participants formed an impression of the unfair leader first, whereas the other half of the participants formed an impression of the fair leader first. Participants had 5 min to read the leader descriptions, and rate their impressions.

We had pre-tested the descriptions of the leaders' behaviors to ensure that they were perceived as clearly fair and unfair. Participants ($N = 58$; 31 females and 27 males) were undergraduate psychology students who participated in exchange for a $1 treat. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to rate the fairness of each of the six fair leader behaviors ($-3 = very\ unfair$, $0 = neutral$, $+3 = very\ fair$) whereas the other half rated each of the six unfair leader behaviors ($-3 = very\ unfair$, $0 = neutral$, $+3 = very\ fair$). An ANOVA was performed between each pair of fair and unfair behaviors. As expected, participants perceived each of the six fair behaviors as more fair than the unfair leader behaviors, $Fs > 42.00$, $ps < .001$ (the means for the fair behaviors ranged from .55 to 2.36, whereas the means for the unfair behaviors ranged from -1.10 to -2.45).

After reading both of the leader descriptions, participants completed a questionnaire, in which they were asked to write a short paragraph of their impressions of the leaders and to provide global fairness ratings of each leader (see Measures section). Participants then completed a filler word search task (for 10 min), purportedly to investigate how they process random letters and recognize words.

Next, participants were required to complete a computer task, ostensibly to examine their perceptions of everyday objects. It was during this task that participants were subliminally primed. In the fair prime condition, participants were exposed to the fair leader's face (as noted earlier, for half of the participants this was Bob and for the other half it was Tom). In the unfair prime condition, participants were exposed to the unfair leader's face (again, for half of the participants this was Tom and for the other half it was Bob). Finally, in the neutral prime condition, participants were exposed to a male face not previously seen (and therefore not associated with fair or unfair behaviors).

We drew on the procedures of Baldwin et al. (1990) and Bargh, Chen, and Burrows (1996) to create our priming task. There were 15 trials. The sequence of events for each trial was as follows: After the participant pressed the spacebar on the keyboard, a stimulus was presented for 21 ms, followed by a mask of colored shapes for 100 ms. On 10 of the trials (trials 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, and 15), the stimulus presented was a face; on the remaining five trials (every third trial) the stimulus presented was an inanimate object (umbrella, book, brief case, chair, and garbage can). All stimuli were presented in color and appeared on a white background. The stimuli were presented inside the participants' foveal (central) visual field. To ensure that the prime was not consciously registered by participants, after each stimulus exposure, participants were instructed to write down what, if anything, they thought they saw flash on the computer screen. We used participants' self-reports to assess for conscious awareness of the prime in light of prior research demonstrating that self-reports provide the best test of conscious awareness (Cheesman & Merikle, 1985).

3.2.2. Phase 2

Participants were told that the purpose of the purported second study was to investigate how undergraduate students' decision-making ability compares to that of practicing managers. During this phase, participants completed an in-basket task, allegedly to assess their decision-making ability. An in-basket task is an involving role-playing exercise in which participants are asked to imagine themselves as the manager of a company and make decisions. In the present study, participants assumed the role of Pat Wells, who had just taken over the duties of the Director of Sales and Marketing for a printing company called Print Solutions Inc. Participants were told that they were recently hired to replace Chris Johnson, the former Director of Sales and Marketing, who resigned from his position on short notice to take a higher-level position at another company.

As the manager, participants were to make decisions and answer questions pertaining to six different work-related issues. For each in-basket item, participants recorded their response to the issue, and then completed a questionnaire about the in-basket item. Only the first in-basket item was of interest for the current study; the other five items served as fillers. Participants had 20 min to complete as much of the in-basket task as they could (all participants were able to complete the critical item within the time allotted). To enhance experimental realism, participants believed that, after the study was complete, we would be comparing their responses to the in-basket items to those of practicing managers.

For the critical in-basket item, participants read a memo from the Human Resource Director informing them that, before the former Director of Sales and Marketing (Chris Johnson) resigned, he made the decision to fire one of the sales agents (Steve Miller). Participants were informed that Chris Johnson decided to fire Steve Miller because his past three performance evaluations were poor. Specifically, participants read that over the past three quarters, Steve Miller did not meet his sales quota, and the company received several customer complaints regarding his performance. Participants were further informed that all the necessary paperwork pertaining to the employee's dismissal was complete, and that they were to communicate the dismissal decision to him as soon as possible. Thus, participants were to write a letter to Steve Miller informing him that he is being fired. They were told to write the letter as if they were actually communicating the dismissal decision to Steve Miller, and to include any information they deemed necessary in communicating the decision to him.

After the 20 min allotted for the in-basket task had elapsed, participants were thanked, and fully debriefed. We used a modification of Bargh and Chartrand's (2000) funneled-debriefing procedure to systematically probe for any suspicion that participants may have had regarding the relation between the first study (creating the prime) and second study (completing the in-basket task). No participants were suspicious of the tasks or our cover story.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Phase 1: impression of leader fairness

Although our pilot test clearly confirmed the success of our leader impression formation task, we nevertheless assessed participants' perceptions of the leaders' overall fairness after they formed their impressions of the leaders in Phase 1 ($-3 = extremely$ $unfair$, $+3 = extremely fair$).

3.3.2. Phase 2: interactional justice

We operationalized interactional justice as the number of explanations, apologies, and other expressions of remorse made by participants in their dismissal letter in Phase 2. We operationalized interactional justice in this manner in light of research demonstrating that following controversial and negative events, explanations, apologies, and other expressions of contrition mitigate people's perceptions of injustice, and foster more favorable attitudes toward the event (see for reviews, Bobocel & Zdaniuk, 2005; Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003). Two independent raters coded participants' dismissal letters for the provision of apology/remorse and explanation. Rater 1 was blind to both experimental condition and the study hypothesis; Rater 2 was blind only to experimental condition. The intraclass correlation (2, k) was .96, $p<.001$, indicating high inter-rater reliability (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979). Disagreement on the codes was resolved through discussion (facilitated by the first author of this paper). See Appendix A for example dismissal letters.

3.3.3. Phase 2: auxiliary explicit measures

To ensure that the differences between the priming conditions were due to the influence of the primes and not to participants' explicit attitudes toward the dismissal decision, we assessed their attitudes using four bipolar items, rated on a scale from 1 to 7: "Chris Johnson's decision to fire Steve Miller was:" *necessary–unnecessary*, *good–bad*, *fair–unfair*, and *reasonable–unreasonable* ($\alpha = .92$). Higher scores reflect more negative attitudes toward the dismissal decision. Likewise, to examine whether participants' emotions could account for differences among condition, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they would feel the emotions *guilt*, *shame*, *anger* and *sadness* over having to fire the employee ($1 = not at all$, $7 = very much$; $\alpha = .79$).

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary results

4.1.1. Success of the subliminal nature of the prime

As noted earlier, during the subliminal priming phase, participants were asked to write down what they saw flash on the computer screen following each trial. An examination of participants' responses revealed that six participants saw a face on one of the trials. To be conservative, we excluded the data of these participants from the analyses.

4.1.2. Impressions of leader fairness

We conducted a paired-samples *t*-test to examine whether participants perceived the fair and unfair leader descriptions from Phase 1 as intended. As expected, participants rated the leader as more unfair ($M = -1.49$, $SD = 1.12$) when he was associated with the unfair behaviors, than when he was associated with fair behaviors ($M = 2.39$, $SD = .74$), $t(60) = 18.81$, $p < .001$.

4.1.3. Counterbalancing 1

We counterbalanced the photograph (Bob or Tom) and fairness behaviors. As such, we checked for possible effects of the photograph on our dependent variables, interactional justice behavior, attitudes, and emotions. We conducted separate 2×2 univariate ANOVAs with prime condition and photograph as factors. No significant main effects of photograph emerged on any of the dependent variables nor were the interactions between priming condition and photograph significant ($Fs < 1.60$). These results rule out the possibility that the results are due to something idiosyncratic about the particular faces that we used.

4.1.4. Counterbalancing 2

We also counterbalanced the order in which participants formed impressions of the fair and unfair leader. As such, we checked for order effects on our dependent variables, interactional justice behavior, attitudes, and emotions. Once again, no significant main effects of order emerged on any of the dependent variables, nor were the interactions between priming condition and order significant ($Fs < 1.90$), indicating that our results are not due to the order in which participants formed their impressions of the fair and unfair leader.

4.2. Effect of the prime on interactional justice, attitudes, and emotions

A one-way ANOVA on interactional justice behavior revealed a significant main effect of condition, $F(2, 119) = 4.05$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .065$. Fig. 1 displays the results. As predicted, when communicating the dismissal decision to the employee, participants provided fewer interactionally fair comments in the unfair prime condition ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 1.02$) than in the neutral prime ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.05$) and the fair prime conditions ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.06$). Planned contrasts revealed that the unfair prime and neutral prime conditions were significantly different from each other ($p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .066$), as were the unfair- and fair-prime conditions ($p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .132$). There was however no significant difference between the fair prime and neutral prime conditions ($p = .63$, $\eta^2 = .013$). Additionally, participant gender did not influence the enactment of interactional justice nor did it interact with priming condition ($Fs < 1.15$).

Interestingly, participants' explicit attitudes toward the dismissal decision did not differ as a function of prime ($F = 1.02$; $Ms = 2.31$, 2.48, and 2.63 for the fair, unfair, and neutral prime conditions, respectively), nor did participants' attitudes correlate with interactional justice ($r = -.03$, $p = .74$). Likewise, emotions did not differ according to prime ($F = 1.78$; $Ms = 2.60$, 2.76, and 3.01 for the fair, unfair, and neutral prime conditions, respectively), nor did they correlate with interactional justice ($r = .11$, $p = .23$). Consistent with these findings, the effect of priming condition on interactional justice remains statistically significant when we controlled participants' attitudes and emotions in a supplementary analysis, $F(2, 114) = 4.05$, $p = .02$. Together, these data indicate that the effect of the subliminal prime on participants' interactional justice behavior is not accounted for by their explicit attitudes or their emotions regarding the dismissal.

5. Discussion

Participants were significantly less interactionally fair when communicating a dismissal decision after being subliminally primed with the face of a leader whom they had mentally associated with unfairness, as compared to when primed with the face of a leader they associated with fairness, or when primed with a neutral face. Moreover, the priming effect remained significant when controlling
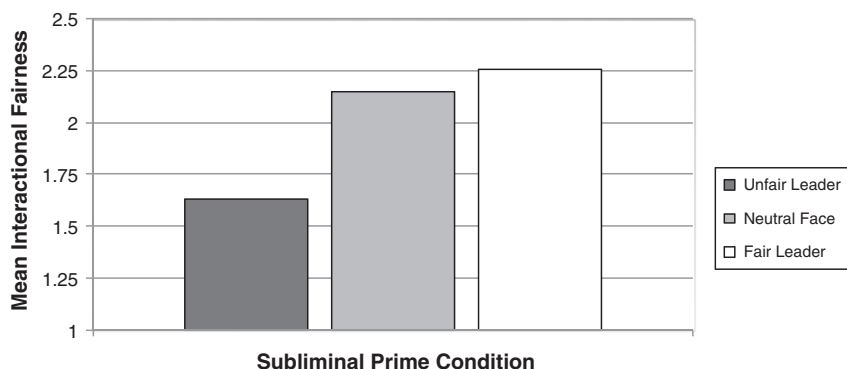

Fig. 1. Mean interactional fairness by subliminal priming condition.

for the effects of participants' explicit attitudes toward the dismissal decision and their explicit emotions, indicating that these variables do not mediate the effect of prime on interactional fairness behavior. This suggests that the psychological mechanism underlying the effect of our subliminal prime on participants' behavior was implicit.

Interestingly, we found significant differences in fairness between the unfair and neutral prime conditions, whereas the difference between the fair and neutral prime conditions was negligible. Although it is not entirely clear why the difference between the neutral and fair prime conditions was not significant, there are several possibilities. For one, it is possible that in the absence of priming fairness, people adhere to a basic level of ethical conduct including being sensitive to others, especially in a situation such as explaining a job dismissal, which may inherently call for interpersonal sensitivity given its severity. In other words, fair interpersonal treatment may represent a baseline to which people adhere within interpersonal exchanges. This idea is consistent with prior theorizing in the social and organizational justice literatures (e.g., Bies, 1987; Folger et al., 2005; Miller, 2001). It has been long argued that justice is a moral and social imperative in that people expect others to adhere to informal norms of ethical conduct in their interactions. Given these norms, priming fairness may have little effect, relative to the control condition. Alternatively, or in addition, it is possible that the leader behaviors were more deeply encoded in the unfair condition relative to the fair condition, during the impression formation stage. Consistent with this idea, prior research has demonstrated that negative impressions are formed quicker and are more resistant to disconfirming evidence than positive impressions (for a review see, Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Finally, it is possible that our null result is due to the nature of our dependent variable, which could have been constrained in terms of the degree of interactional justice that participants could express.

5.1. Strengths and limitations

Several strengths of the current research are noteworthy. First, as noted in the Introduction, our primary goal was to demonstrate that our predicted effects can occur. Thus, a major strength of the current research is that it allows causal inference: Relative to a control condition, priming participants' subliminally with the face of a leader whom they had previously associated with unfairness led them to be less interactionally fair toward another. Second, although participants were students, we took steps to enhance experimental realism by leading them to believe that their responses to the in-basket task (our dependent measure) would be compared to those of practicing managers. Third, by controlling participants' explicit attitudes toward the dismissal and emotional reactions, we demonstrated that our conclusions pertaining to the effect of the subliminal prime on interactional justice are not instead due to participants' explicit reactions. Finally, it is noteworthy that our priming manipulation had a *medium* effect size (see Cohen, 1988). Given that the manipulation was *not perceived* by participants, this suggests that non-conscious influences may play an important role in how people enact fairness.

There are of course several limitations of our methodology, which can be addressed in future research. First, we simulated an organizational context, thus, future research should examine whether the effects reported here replicate in the natural work environment with actual managers, and with real leaders with whom managers share a long-term relationship. It is possible that the results would be stronger if people are primed with the face of their actual leader, in light of evidence in the psychological literature demonstrating that the stronger one's relationship closeness with the target of the prime, the stronger the effects of priming (Leander et al., 2009; Shah, 2003). Relatedly, given that we did not vary the hierarchical status of the person serving as the prime, it would be of interest to examine whether any salient other can influence people's enactment of fairness via automatic processing. Furthermore, whereas our dependent variable comprised the enactment of interactional justice, future research should examine whether the effects generalize to different fairness criteria, such those pertaining to the enactment of procedural and distributive justice.

Another potential limitation relates to the fact that there were no consequences associated with the dismissal letter, such as fear of legal action by the employee being dismissed. Thus, it is possible that participants may not have devoted their full attention to writing the dismissal letter, making them more susceptible to influences at the implicit level. In contrast, it is possible that in the workplace, managers rely on more deliberate and effortful processing, thereby potentially reducing the influence of implicit processes such as those observed in the current study. Still, as noted earlier, we bolstered participants' psychological involvement by leading them to believe that their responses would be compared to those of practicing managers. However, future research is needed to examine whether the effects that we have shown *can* occur, in fact *do* occur (Mook, 1983).

Despite the limitations, we believe our theoretical approach could profitably be applied to future research on automatic, unconscious influences on the enactment of justice, thereby further advancing researchers' understanding of implicit processing in work organizations. We also believe that our framework could have broader significance for continued theory, research, and practice in organizational behavior. In the spirit of the goals of this special issue, we will now identity several important avenues for extending the present research. We then discuss the contributions and implications of our findings.

5.2. Directions for future research

There are several viable directions for future research. For one, it would be of interest to examine whether our predicted effects would hold if participants were aware of the priming. In other words, would people attempt to correct for the effects of their experience with unfair leaders prior to their enactment of interactional fairness, or would they consciously model the leader's unfair treatment of others? On the one hand, research has shown that when participants are made aware of the priming episode (e.g., through a blatant warning to avoid being influenced by their prior experience), the awareness can produce contrasting or opposite effects (e.g., for a review see Martin, Strack, & Stapel, 2001). On the other hand, in line with social learning

theory (Bandura, 1986), employees may consciously model their leaders' fairness behaviors, leading them to treat others interpersonally, as they themselves have been treated by superiors. Indeed, several scholars have argued that leaders serve as important role models for followers (e.g., Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005).

Second, it would be fruitful to examine how long our predicted priming effects endure. Psychological research on social judgment has shown that supraliminal priming effects can be detected up to 24 h following the priming episode (Srull & Wyer, 1979, 1980) and that subliminal primes can affect people's sense of self over delays as long as four months (Sohlberg & Birgegard, 2003). Other research has shown that when the concept that is primed corresponds with the dependent variable assessed (as in The current research), the priming effect can persist for extended periods of time (Smith & Branscombe, 1987, 1988), primarily due to a practice effect. Given these findings, it is possible that automatic activation of leader (un)fairness may be relatively long-lasting.

Third, there might be different ways in which people's mental representations are activated automatically, rather than by the face of the individual. For example, it is possible that priming could occur by exposure to an object that is closely associated with a leader (e.g., a gift placed on one's desk). Consistent with this idea, research has shown that people develop associations between objects and psychological experience, resulting in attitudes and behaviors consistent with their associations. For example, Williams and Bargh (2008) showed that holding a cup of hot coffee or taking a warm bath influenced psychological experiences consistent with a sense of warmth (e.g., trust, generosity) without people's awareness. Given that leaders often use symbols, placed throughout an organization, to reinforce values held by them (Schein, 2010), it is possible that these symbols could serve to influence employees' attitudes and behaviors, even in the leader's absence.

Finally, future research could extend our findings by examining whether variations in beliefs in social justice would moderate our predicted effect. Would those who strongly value social justice act contrary to their beliefs following unconscious priming? We suspect that the answer to this question may depend on whether the situation stimulates competing motivations. Within the context of delivering bad news (e.g., a dismissal decision), the motivation to relieve personal distress arising from having to communicate the decision may be more salient than the motivation to ensure interpersonally fair treatment. Thus, all people (regardless of their beliefs in social justice) may be motivated to communicate the decision quickly so as to relieve their discomfort, making everyone susceptible to subliminal priming effects. This idea is consistent with the work of Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, and Wilson (1997) demonstrating that when morality and self-interest compete, even those who strongly value morality can behave immorally. When competing motivations (such as self-interest) are absent, however, those who strongly value justice may be more inclined to behave consistently with their core values, making them less susceptible to behaving unfairly, even when unconsciously driven to do so.[1]

5.3. Theoretical contributions and implications

Recently, George (2009) has argued that much theorizing and research in organizational behavior assumes that organizational members' behaviors and decisions are under deliberate and conscious choice. Moreover, she suggests that organizational research may be incomplete and perhaps inaccurate by assuming that behavior in organizations is predominately consciously controlled, in light of the evidence for the automaticity of human behavior. We concur with George (2009), "…the time has come for organizational scholars to question their implicit assumption of organizational behavior as predominantly consciously willed behavior" (p. 1319).

The present framework sheds light on one way in which automatic processes may play out in the context of fairness behavior. Thus, we offer new insight into the study of organizational justice. Inherent in many of the traditional organizational justice theories, such as equity theory (Adams, 1965) and the group-value and relational models of procedural justice (e.g., Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992) is the premise that employees' fairness judgments are formed consciously and deliberately, and that reactions to injustice involve awareness and control. As mentioned earlier, several theoretical approaches to fairness diverge from this assumption to some degree (e.g., Bobocel et al., 1997; Folger et al., 2005; Lerner, 2003; Lind, 2001; Van den Bos et al., 2001). Our research extends these theoretical perspectives by suggesting that once a person mentally associates an authority figure with fairness or unfairness, these associations can unconsciously influence the individual's fairness toward a third-party. Our research also extends prior research discussed earlier (e.g., Johnson & Lord, 2010; Johnson & Steinman, 2009). Taken together, evidence is growing to indicate the need to consider implicit processing at a number of stages in the study of organizational justice: the formation of fairness judgments, the experience of justice, as well as the enactment of justice.

More generally, our findings contribute to the sparse research investigating the antecedents of fairness behavior (e.g., Folger & Skarlicki, 2001; Korsgaard et al., 1998; Patient & Skarlicki, 2010; Scott et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2009). Given the important consequences of employees' perceptions of fairness (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2001), it is both theoretically and practically important to understand factors that facilitate and detract from managers' enactment of justice. Our study demonstrates that people's enactment of justice can be influenced automatically by factors beyond their conscious awareness.

Our approach also extends prior research examining the relation between leadership and justice perceptions. Stemming from the relational model of procedural fairness (Tyler & Lind, 1992), there has been a longstanding interest in the connection between fairness and leadership (e.g., Alexander & Ruderman, 1987; Cobb & Frey, 1996; Folger & Konovsky, 1989; Tyler & Caine, 1981). In recent years, there has been resurgence in research in this vein (e.g., De Cremer, 2003; Peterson, 1999; Philips,

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[1] We appreciate the insightful comments we received from the Editor and reviewers regarding future directions.

Douthitt, & Hyland, 2001; Platow & Van Knippenberg, 2001; Tyler & De Cremer, 2005). This body of literature has however predominately focused on how various leader behaviors influence recipients' perceptions of fairness, or on how fair or unfair treatment influences people's perceptions of leaders. Our findings demonstrate that leaders also have an important role in influencing another's enactment of fairness. Thus, our research provides empirical support for Lord and Brown's proposition that leaders can influence subordinates' values, self-concepts, and behaviors unconsciously (Lord & Brown, 2001, 2004; also see Lord, Brown, & Freiburg, 1999).

The data raise an interesting possibility for theoretical work on leader categorization theory. According to the categorization theory of leadership (Lord, Foti, & DeVader, 1984; Lord, Foti, & Phillips, 1982; Lord & Maher, 1991; Phillips & Lord, 1981), people develop knowledge structures that allow them to distinguish between leaders and non-leaders. In others words, people develop implicit leadership theories or leader prototypes, which specify the traits and behaviors that are expected of leaders. The leader categorization process is proposed to occur automatically via unconscious cognitive processing. The theory suggests that people use their leader prototype to evaluate current leaders (Foti, Fraser, & Lord, 1982; Lord & Maher, 1991; Lord et al., 1984; see also Nye & Forsyth, 1991). For example, it has been proposed that leaders who display traits and behaviors that match subordinates' prototypes of an effective leader will be evaluated more favorably than leaders who violate subordinates' leadership prototypes. Although we are not aware of prior research examining the malleability of leadership prototypes, it is possible that repeated exposure to a particular leader's goals and behaviors may alter people's knowledge structures of a prototypical leader. If employees come to associate unfairness with a particular leader, over time they may come to believe that such treatment is prototypical of leaders. If so, then employees may perceive the leader's unfair behavior as morally appropriate. Such a shift in leader prototype might help to explain why sometimes people do not object to unethical leader behaviors.

5.4. Practical implications

The study of implicit processes in organizational fairness behavior also has practical implications. In our research, participants lacked awareness of the potential effect and influence of the priming stimuli. In other words, they were unaware of why they communicated the dismissal decision as they did. Such an effect could play out in organizations in harmful ways. For example, if managers and employees are not consciously aware of the underlying motivations for, or influences on, their unfair treatment of others, they may rationalize or misattribute their behavior to other factors, such as, the deservingness of the recipient. Moreover, research on automaticity has shown that repeated and frequent exposure to specific concepts, such as aggression (Todorov & Bargh, 2002), can develop into stable individual differences expressed in the chronic accessibility of these concepts. Thus, it may be possible that repeated exposure to unfairness in the workplace may result in chronic accessibility of the concept of unfairness, and this could affect, for example, how new fairness-related events are interpreted and remembered. This idea is consistent with the research of Ritter et al. (2005) discussed earlier. Although history of discrimination was not assessed, their finding that minorities reported greater implicit expectations of injustice compared to non-minorities, suggests that repeated exposure to injustice may indeed result in the chronic accessibility of injustice.

Finally, our approach may suggest that unfair treatment could perpetuate injustice, again without conscious awareness. Specifically, if people associate unfairness goals and behaviors with others, and then pursue these behaviors unconsciously themselves, it is possible for unfairness to permeate within an organization unknowingly. Such a cycle of unfairness would be destructive to organizations, given the array of negative consequences of perceived unfairness on employee work attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2001). Our line of reasoning is consistent with empirical work examining the effects of abusive supervision on employees' explicit actions of deviance and retaliation (for a review of research examining the antecedents and consequences of abusive supervision see Tepper, 2007). For example, Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) found that abusive supervision was positively related to supervisor-directed deviance, interpersonal deviance, and organizational-directed deviance. Aryee, Chen, Sun, and Debrah (2007) found that supervisors who were themselves victims of injustice were more abusive toward their subordinates. Additionally, Inness, Barling, and Turner (2005) found a positive relation between subordinates' perceptions of abusive supervision and their supervisor-targeted aggression. Following his review of abusive supervision in work organizations, Tepper (2007) proposed a "trickle-down" model of abusive supervision. The model states that the unfair treatment supervisors experience themselves trickles down through abusive supervision to produce feelings of injustice and anti-social reactions among subordinate targets. Although explicit processes may underlie Tepper's model, it is also plausible that unconscious influences may be at play. Indeed, our theoretical framework could offer a novel mechanism by which abusive supervision trickles down to influence subordinates' anti-social behaviors.

6. Conclusion

Our theoretical framework and research suggest that the extent to which people enact fairness toward a third-party can be influenced by their mental representation of the unfairness of a salient other via automatic, non-conscious cognitive processes. More broadly, we demonstrate that important work behaviors may not always be under people's deliberate and conscious control, and that other people can be influential in triggering one's unfairness behavior unconsciously. Further investigations of implicit processes in the study of organizational justice and in other areas of the organizational sciences will undoubtedly enhance and enrich our understanding of human behavior in the workplace.

Appendix A. Verbatim examples of participants' dismissal letters in the fair and unfair subliminal prime conditions

Fair prime condition	*Dear Steve, I regret to inform you that your last day of work will be this upcoming Monday. This decision was made by my predecessor as well as other areas of upper management. The reasons for your dismissal (as relayed to me) related to your past three performance evaluations and your inability to meet your sales quota. I'm deeply sorry for this and hope that you will have greater luck in the future. On behalf of the company, thank you for your past work in the sales and marketing department. Best of luck,*
	Hello Steve, It is with great regret that I must inform you that we are going to have to let you go. This has not been my choice, but with your previous three performance evaluations be the way they are, we simply cannot afford to keep you with us any longer. If you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to contact me. I hope you all the best. Sincerely,
	Dear Steve, Unfortunately we have not had much time to communicate but as the new manager I have been given a file completed by Chris Miller indicating that your performance and [sic] Print Solutions has been a source of concern. Due to three performance appraisals and sales quota concerns we have decided to relieve you of your duties as a sales agent. I would like to meet with you to discuss notice and any help I can be in efforts to find you a new position. My ext. is ___ and the meeting will be tomorrow at 3 pm.
Unfair prime condition	*Steve Miller, As you know I have taken over the responsibilities of Chris Johnson. Due to your last three performance evaluations, you are being dismissed*
	Hi Steve, I have a bad news for you, because of your past low performance evaluation we decide to fire you because your performance is compromising the image of the company. Sincerely,
	Mr. Miller, Due to inadequate performance evaluation and several other factors, it has been decided that you will be dismissed from this company. Please email me with any concerns you may have about your dismissal. Regards,

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