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LEADER EMPATHY

When Leaders Choose to be Fair: Follower Belongingness Needs and Leader Empathy  
Influences Leaders' Adherence to Procedural Fairness Rules

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Abstract

Previous studies on procedural fairness have largely neglected to examine factors that influence leaders' enactment of fairness. The present three studies investigated the combined impact of follower belongingness needs and leader empathy. It was revealed that leaders are more apt to enact fair procedures when followers' belongingness needs are high rather than low. This effect was further moderated by leader empathy, such that highly empathic leaders, either because of individual differences or through situational induction, take followers' belongingness needs more into account. The relevance of these findings for procedural rule adherence and violation as a dependent variable and empathic leadership are discussed.

Key words: procedural fairness, justice, rule adherence, group value model, need to belong, leadership, empathy

When Leaders Choose to be Fair: Follower Belongingness Needs and Leader Empathy  
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*Leadership should be born out of the understanding of the needs of those who would be affected by it.*

- Marian Anderson (1897 - 1993), celebrated African-American singer who fought on behalf of Black artists to overcome racial prejudice

Procedural justice, or fairness in decision making and the allocation of outcomes by an authority (Leventhal, 1980), has demonstrated positive and pervasive effects on followers' attitudes and behaviors (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Given the importance of the enactment of fair procedures for the welfare of groups and their members it is surprising to see that hardly any research has devoted attention to leaders' enactment of fair procedures as a dependent variable (Brebels, De Cremer, van Dijke, & Van Hiel, 2011; Cornelis, Van Hiel, & De Cremer, 2012; Scott, Colquitt, & Zapata-Phelan, 2007). It therefore remains unclear when leaders will behave in a procedurally fair manner, and what exactly motivates leaders to enact fair procedures. Here, we aim to address this research question (for a similar discussion on interactional fairness, see Patient & Skarlicki, 2010) by investigating possible influences on the enactment of fair procedures.

We focus on leaders' use of fair procedures as an effective leadership tool to motivate employees and to detect and regulate employees' needs and motives (Cornelis et al., 2012; De Cremer & Tyler, 2010). In fact, being sensitive and responsive with adequate reactions to the needs of followers has been cited as a critical aspect of leadership (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000). According to relational models of fairness, followers care about procedural fairness (PF) because it signals the degree to which they are accepted by the group (De Cremer & Tyler,

2005; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Blader, 2000; Tyler & Lind, 1992). In line with this assumption, a vast amount of studies has demonstrated that people with stronger belongingness needs value procedural fairness more (e.g. De Cremer & Blader, 2006; De Cremer & Tyler, 2005; Van Prooijen, Van den Bos, & Wilke, 2004). Hence, through fair procedures, an effective leader may help to regulate employees' belongingness needs, and therefore the willingness of those employees to cooperate may be enhanced.

However, although the need to belong is a fundamental human motive, there are large individual differences in the strength and intensity of this need, and thus in the degree to which individuals may be motivated by the use of fair procedures. Therefore, one can expect that highly empathic leaders, who are more sensitive to these individual differences and who have the capacity to recognize these needs and adapt their behavior accordingly, might be more able to optimally adapt the use of fair procedures. Hence, we expect that leaders' adherence to fairness rules in response to followers' belongingness needs is moderated by leader empathy.

#### *Leaders' Enactment of Fair Procedures*

Previous research has shown the pervasive effects of procedural fairness on a variety of emotional, attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, such as self-esteem (Brockner et al., 2003), emotions (De Cremer, 2006), cooperation (De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2002) and relationships with other group members (Cornelis, Van Hiel, & De Cremer, 2006). However, there exists only limited knowledge on what makes leaders behave in ways that are more or less fair to followers, and often these findings have not been framed in terms of procedural fairness. For example, Maner and Mead (2010) identified a number of factors that determine whether leaders will act selfishly or choose a course of action that benefits the groups' goals; whereas Georgesen and Harris (2006) demonstrated that leaders' who feel safe in their power position welcome contributions from their subordinates and award them more prize money

than leaders who feel themselves threatened. However, the existing literature that focuses explicitly on procedural justice has been *reactive* rather than *pro-active* to a large extent (Greenberg, 1987), focusing on the 'recipient' of (un)fair treatment, rather than examining antecedents of leader behavior (Tyler & Smith, 1998). Recently, there has been increased attention for this "critical gap...in the literature" (Scott, Colquitt, & Paddock., 2009, p. 756) and there have been some initial attempts to study "...fair treatment as a dependent variable and attempts to explain why managers do not always practice fairness principles" (Folger & Skarlicki, 2001, p. 98). Hence, a crucial question remains: when do leaders pay attention to being procedurally fair? Here, we focus on followers' needs and motives as possible antecedents of leaders' use of fair procedures. More specifically, we based our predictions on models of procedural fairness that spotlight motivational processes and which allow to predict for whom and under which circumstances fair procedures are particularly motivating.

Leadership and the successful motivation of individuals through social influence processes implies both an understanding of the motivational state of the target one wants to influence (Cartwright, 1965), and the ability and willingness to act upon it (House, 1991). Hence, leaders may attempt to influence followers' behavior through the regulation of followers' emotions and needs, as was for example demonstrated by Bono, Foldes, Vinson, and Muros (2007) who showed that (transformational) leaders can regulate employees' emotions, by being sensitive to and supportive of employees emotional needs. Here, we propose that correctly identifying and appropriately responding to followers' needs through adhering to procedural rules can be considered an important managerial tool eliciting followers' willingness to cooperate and to voluntarily comply with the group's rules and goals (see Tyler & Blader, 2003) and may therefore represent at least one avenue through which leaders may attempt to motivate followers.

*Procedural fairness: the importance of belongingness needs*

Several models have proposed different motives for why people care about procedural fairness, the most prominent ones referring to control motives (Thibaut & Walker, 1975, 1978), moral values (Folger, 1998) and relational concerns (e.g. De Cremer & Tyler, 2005). The relational models represent an influential group of theories, including the group value model (Lind & Tyler, 1988) and the relational model of authority (Tyler & Lind, 1992). According to these theories, fair procedures communicate to followers that they are respected and hold a positive standing within the group (De Cremer & Blader, 2006; for an overview, see De Cremer & Tyler, 2005).

It has been argued that procedural fairness does not only reveal relational information, but that it specifically communicates information about belongingness and thus appeals to people's need to belong (De Cremer & Tyler, 2005; Gillespie & Greenberg, 2005). The need to belong reflects the desire to form and maintain positive and continuous relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and has been considered one of the most important social motives helping individuals, among others, to control outcomes and to enhance the self, as well as facilitating understanding of other group members (Fiske, 2004). Although the need to belong is inherent to all people, individuals also differ in the strength of this need, irrespective of their existing social ties (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Empirical findings have demonstrated that, in accordance with the aforementioned relational models, people's levels of belongingness needs shape how they process and react to the relational information inherent in fair processes, such that the effects are stronger when belongingness needs are higher (De Cremer & Blader, 2006; De Cremer & Tyler, 2005).

Hence, because fairness is particularly motivating to followers as it meets their individual motives, it stands to reason that followers' need to belong can be an antecedent of leaders' enactment of procedural fairness (Cornelis et al., 2012). However, this requires that the leader has both an awareness of other people's needs and motives and sufficient

motivation to adequately react to these needs. Empathic people in particular are inclined to be more aware of and respond to others' imagined or observed experiences (De Vignemont & Singer, 2006) and therefore we propose leader empathy to moderate this process of belongingness need regulation via procedural fairness enactment.

#### *Empathic Leadership and Enactment of Fair Procedures*

In the context of leader-follower interactions, leader empathy, or the ability to accurately recognize, perceive, and experience another's emotions, is likely to affect the degree to which leaders are inclined to take actions based on followers' motives (Zaki, Bolger, & Ochsner, 2008). Empathy is recognized as a pivotal element in successful leadership (Bass, 1999; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004) and we propose that empathic leaders adapt their behavior in response to the correct detection of followers' needs (Batson, 1991; Stotland, 1969). Specifically, as we argued earlier, we assume that particularly when leaders are highly empathic they will recognize followers' needs, as well as the fact that these needs can be satisfied through procedural fairness. Consequently, those leaders in particular will meet employees' concerns through the use of procedurally fair rules.

We note that we focused on one aspect of leader empathy, that is, leaders' empathic concern. Empathic concern reflects variations in vicarious other-oriented emotions, "feeling for" the other person and understanding the needs of others (Davis, 1996) which has been linked to an increased motivation to take actions in response to these needs (e.g. Batson, 1991; Davis 1996; Eisenberg, 2000; Eisenberg et al. 1989). Although another component of empathy, perspective taking, is also associated with an increased awareness of other people's needs, empathic concern in particular is proposed to invoke altruistic motivations to satisfy the needs of another, often resulting in pro-social actions taken on behalf of others. Indeed, there is considerable evidence for the relationship between empathic concern and pro-social behavior (e.g. Batson 1991; Davis 1996; Eisenberg 2000; Eisenberg et al. 1989). 'Affective'

empathy has been conceptualized as both increasing awareness as well as providing energy to respond (adapting behavior) (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989; Håkansson & Montgomery, 2003). Furthermore, it has been revealed that the mere 'cold' cognitive appraisal of a person's needs and how this need might be fulfilled is not enough to elicit behavior, but the 'hot' emotional response of empathy is a necessary condition for these cognitive appraisals to become translated in actual behavior, an effect that has even been noted in young children (see, Miller, Eisenberger, Fabes, & Shell, 1996).

Hence, although empathy may be expected to enhance leaders' overall willingness to adhere to justice rules, as was demonstrated by the finding that managers' empathic concern increased interpersonal and informational justice when communicating bad news (Patient & Skarlicki, 2010), here we were predominantly interested in examining whether empathic leaders are more likely to be sensitive to belongingness needs and adapt their fairness behaviors accordingly (i.e., we consider empathy as a moderator of the effects of follower belongingness needs on procedural fairness rule adherence). We proposed that followers' belongingness needs are antecedents of leaders' procedural fairness rule adherence when leaders are sufficiently high in empathic concern. Thus, we predicted an interaction effect between followers' belongingness needs and leader empathy. Indeed, context and disposition often reinforce each other yielding significant interaction effects (as implied by the interactionism approach, see Snyder & Cantor, 1998). We tested this hypothesis in a series of three studies.

### *Study 1*

In this initial study, we investigated the relationship between follower belongingness needs and leaders' granting of voice, a relationship we expect to be moderated by leaders' dispositional empathic concern. We focus here specifically on the much examined procedural fairness rule of voice. Research has shown that procedures granting voice to group members

are perceived as fairer than procedures that deny voice (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). In the current study, we operationalized voice through a number of indicators capturing leaders' willingness to consult other group members' opinions about a subject that could have important implications for these group members.

We manipulated perceptions of followers' belongingness needs by visually representing group members as either relatively peripheral, suggesting a relatively high (temporary) need to belong, or as included in the group, suggesting that belongingness needs were met and therefore less salient. Indeed, people who feel accepted and included in a group have satisfied their belongingness need and are less driven by these needs than people for whom this need has not been met (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For example, peripheral group members are motivated more strongly to increase their acceptance by the group (Noel, Branscombe, & Wann, 1995) and to respond to cues that indicate acceptance from the group than core group members (De Cremer, 2002).

### *Method*

#### *Participants and Design*

One hundred and seventeen Dutch undergraduate students participated in exchange for partial course credit. They were randomly assigned to a high versus low target NTB condition. Fourteen participants clearly failed on the target NTB manipulation check (see below, scoring below 2.5 on a 7-point scale in the high NTB condition and above 5.5 in the low NTB condition), which left available the data of 103 participants (54 women and 49 males; mean age = 19.84 years,  $SD = 1.53$ ) for further analyses.

#### *Experimental Procedure and Materials*

Students were seated behind computers in individual cubicles located in different rooms. They were informed that they were appointed 'group leader' of a three-person group (including themselves) and the group task was to be completed by interacting through the

computer system. Participants were invited to take a look at a picture of their 'fellow group members' who were 'prepared' and waiting for the experiment to begin. The photo contained the belongingness need manipulation and depicted the target group member as either sitting in between two other people, one of whom was the other group member (low belongingness need), or sitting somewhat isolated from the others (high belongingness need)<sup>1</sup>. The people depicted were identifiable by large letters (with A and B being relevant group members, target was always B) pinned to their clothes.

Following the presentation of this picture, the group task was introduced. Participants were informed that the university was interested to learn students' opinions about different evaluation systems which might be implemented the following year, and as group leader they were responsible for providing a final report. Each group member would first read a text introducing the evaluation systems and write down their own ideas. Then, it would be up to the group leader to decide whether (s)he wanted to consult other group members' opinions to be incorporated in the final report. However, they were told that doing so would imply additional work and time spent in the lab<sup>2</sup>. Participants had to make decisions regarding voice and consultation of group members prior to actually reading and writing the text (presumably to allow the experimenter to prepare smooth transactions). These decisions constituted the dependent measure. Afterwards, we solicited the manipulation check and participants were told the group task would not continue due to time constraints. They continued with an unrelated questionnaire study on the computer that also contained the empathic concern measure.

### *Measures*

*Manipulation check.* Two items measured the success of the target NTB manipulation on a seven-point scale from 'not at all' to 'very much': "To what extent has group member B

a need to belong” and “To what extent has group member B a strong desire to be accepted by the group” ( $\alpha = .74$ ,  $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ).

*Voice.* We asked participants, a) whether they wanted to give the target an opportunity to provide input in the report (39 participants answered affirmative for the target)<sup>3</sup>, b) how many minutes they wanted to spend listening to the target's arguments ( $M = 8.50$ ,  $SD = 7.41$ , c) how much effort they wanted to invest in giving the target voice (seven-point scale from ‘not at all’ to ‘very much’,  $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ), d) to choose which group member (or none) they wanted to consult (32 participants chose the target) and e) to choose which group member (or none) they would allow to correct the final report (17 participants chose target). We combined these indicators by conducting a PCA with a single component solution (eigenvalue 2.35, accounting for 46.7 % of the total variance) and used the resulting component score as the dependent variable ‘Voice’.

*Empathic Concern.* We measured dispositional Empathy using the items of the Empathic Concern subscale from the IRI (Davis, 1983), rated on a seven-point scale ( $\alpha = .75$ ;  $M = 5.09$ ,  $SD = .79$ ).

### Results

*Manipulation check.* A hierarchical regression analysis with target NTB, centered leader empathic concern and their cross-product indicated a significant main effect of follower NTB,  $t = 3.94$ ,  $p < .01$ , on participants' ratings of the target group member's NTB, with high NTB targets rated significantly higher ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = .89$ ) than low NTB targets ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ). All other effects were non-significant.

*Voice.* A regression analysis with Voice as the dependent variable indicated a significant main effect of target NTB ( $\beta = .20$ ) and a marginally significant main effect of Empathic concern ( $\beta = .18$ ), which were further qualified by a significant interaction ( $\beta = .26$ ) between target NTB and empathic concern in the next step ( $\Delta R^2 = .06$ ,  $F(1, 98) = 6.99$ ,  $p <$

.05). This interaction effect (plotted in Figure 1), shows that participants with high empathic concern adapted voice rule adherence more to match followers' belongingness needs. Simple slope tests confirmed a significant effect of target NTB (high vs. low) on participants' voice granting at high levels of dispositional Empathic Concern,  $\beta = .41$ ,  $t = 3.03$ ,  $p < .001$ , but not at low levels of empathic concern,  $\beta = -.07$ ,  $t = -0.53$ , *ns*.

### *Discussion*

Using an experimental methodology and a target NTB manipulation with low demand characteristics, the findings of Study 1 demonstrated that leaders' willingness to adhere to procedural fairness rules was affected by followers' belongingness needs and that this process is most salient among those leaders high in dispositional empathic concern. It should be noted, however, that because of the subtle manipulation used in this Study, a number of participants ( $N = 14$ ) clearly failed on the manipulation check.

Research has shown that people do not only differ in terms of *dispositional* empathic concern or the tendency to respond emotionally to others (Batson, 1991; Davis, 1980, 1996), but that empathic concerns can also be induced by situational demands (see e.g., Batson & Ahmad, 2001). This 'situational empathy' can be induced by instructing people to use a leadership style that focuses on other people's emotions (Patient & Skarlicki, 2010). Hence, while we demonstrated the moderating impact of leader empathy as a trait, the issue remains that especially in organizational settings, leader fairness behaviors in response to followers' needs can be expected to be strongly influenced by situational norms or characteristics that might inhibit or stimulate the expression of empathic behavior.

### *Study 2*

In Study 2, we aimed to replicate the previous findings by manipulating rather than measuring leaders' empathic concern. We manipulate empathy by emphasizing either the importance of empathic leadership or, alternatively, by stressing the importance of leadership

based on an objective and detached perspective (instructions similar to those used in other studies to induce empathy; see e.g., Batson, 1991). Target NTB was also manipulated more directly as it could be easily inferred from the messages sent by the target to the leader.

### *Method*

#### *Participants and Design*

Ninety-two Belgian undergraduate students (participated in exchange for course credit. They were randomly assigned to a 2 (high vs. low target NTB) x 2 (empathic vs. task-focused leadership style induction) between-subjects design. Data of 9 participants were removed (according to the same criteria as in Study 1) because their score on the manipulation check items indicated they had not correctly read or understood the manipulation. The final sample consisted of 51 women and 26 males (6 participants did not indicate their gender), with a mean age = 18.51 years ( $SD = 1.15$ ).

#### *Experimental Procedure and Materials*

Students participated in groups of six. They were seated behind computers that were placed at some distance from each other. Before the start of the group task, students completed a few questionnaires to make our manipulations more believable. The group task was to be completed by interacting through an instant messaging system which allows several people ('contacts') to interact in instant one-to-one typed conversations. Participants could see the five other participants in their list of 'contacts', assigned seemingly random names such as 'team member 215' and 'team member 355'. There was also an 'experimenter' contact who assigned tasks and informed team members what to do. Although participants had the impression that they were able to interact with the other participants, in reality they could only interact with the experimenter, who also controlled the other 'team members'.

Participants were told that, based on their questionnaire scores, they had been appointed as the team leader. They were then instructed to read a short text describing a

leadership style, which constituted the empathic/task-focused leadership style manipulation. This text claimed, among other things, that “...successful leaders are those who empathize with their subordinates / who are rational and focus objectively on tasks and goals”<sup>4</sup>. They were instructed to use this strategy during the group task and to imagine during the group task how their subordinates might experience the task and how it affects them/ not to imagine how their subordinates might experience the task, but to maintain a rational and detached perspective (respectively empathic/ task-focused condition).

They were asked to notify the other team members that they were the team leader. The target group member replied with a first message which simply said: “hi leader”, followed by another message which contained the manipulation of target NTB: “*did you get results from the questionnaire? I got this, and it's actually pretty accurate*”. This second message also included a seemingly copied and pasted text, supposedly sent by the experimenter to the target group member:

*“experimenter says:*

*You score higher/ lower than average on a scale tapping the need to attain and maintain meaningful relationships with other people. You want to be accepted by others and you are bothered when others do not seem to accept you/ You do not let it bother you when other people do not seem to accept you and you do not feel a strong need to belong (respectively high vs. low target NTB manipulation).*

Two different group member supposedly also replied to the participant's first message, simply saying “*Hello, leader*”, followed by a neutral comment “*Whoa- it's pretty hot and stuffy in here*” while another group member simply replied “*Hi leader*”.

Then, the group task was introduced which was similar to the one used in Study 1. Afterwards, the dependent measures were solicited.

*Measures*

*Manipulation check of Target Belongingness Needs.* The same two items as in Study 1 were used to check the target NTB manipulation ( $\alpha = .80$ ,  $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ).

*Voice.* We expanded the set of indicators from Study 1 with an additional Likert-scale item rated on a seven-point scale from 'not at all' to 'very much' ("I want to know this group member's opinion,"  $M = 5.61$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) and an additional item asking what proportion of the text they were willing to consider (e.g., 1/10<sup>th</sup>,  $M = 0.60$ ,  $SD = 2.24$ ). We combined these indicators into a single score by conducting a PCA with a single component solution (eigenvalue 2.00, 40% explained variance). In our subsequent analyses we examined this component Voice score, with a high score indicating more voice.

### Results

*Manipulation check.* A 2 x 2 ANOVA indicated a significant main effect of follower NTB,  $F(1, 76) = 98.61$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .57$  on participants' ratings of the target group member's NTB, with high NTB targets rated significantly higher ( $M = 5.62$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) than low NTB targets ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ). All other effects were not significant.

*Voice.* A 2 x 2 ANOVA with the voice component as the dependent variable indicated only a significant interaction between target NTB and the Empathy manipulation,  $F(1, 76) = 5.04$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .06$ . This interaction, plotted in Figure 2, shows that, unlike participants in the Task-focused condition, those in the Empathic condition adapt voice rule adherence to suit followers' belongingness needs. Contrast analyses demonstrated that leaders' willingness to grant voice towards high and low NTB targets is significantly different in the Empathic condition,  $F(1, 76) = 7.04$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .09$ , while no such difference emerged in the Task-focused condition,  $F(1, 76) = .42$ ,  $ns$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .00$ .

### Discussion

The findings of Study 2 demonstrate that leaders' willingness to adapt voice to match follower's belongingness needs can be moderated by situational constraints, i.e. a context that

encourages or discourages empathic involvement, corroborating our earlier findings that looked at the influence of dispositional empathy. These combined studies thus provide supportive evidence for the hypothesis that leaders attempt to regulate followers' needs through the use of fair procedures, particularly when leaders are high in dispositional or induced empathic concern. In a final study, we aimed to examine our interaction hypothesis in a real-life setting among organizational leaders.

### *Study 3*

Organizational supervisors with at least three subordinates were first asked to identify both a high NTB subordinate and a low NTB subordinate. Next, we asked them to indicate the extent to which they acted procedurally fair toward each of these two subordinates.

Additionally, leaders rated themselves on a measure of dispositional empathic concern. We again expected leaders to enact more fair procedures towards high NTB employees, but only when they were high in dispositional empathy.

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

We collected questionnaire data from a sample of 131 employed Flemish adults (40 women and 89 males, mean age = 46.96 years,  $SD = 8.14$ ). Mean organizational tenure was 18.45 years ( $SD = 10.31$ ) and on average respondents were in charge of a work group of 17.37 people ( $SD = 29.78$ ). A large majority (about 75 %) possessed a higher education degree. We succeeded in obtaining a heterogeneous sample with respondents working in different organizational settings and jobs, as such enhancing the representativeness and generalizability of our sample.

#### *Procedure and Measures*

To obtain a diverse sample of job types and organizations, research assistants approached potential respondents with supervisory responsibilities from different

organizations located in the Flemish region of Belgium. A total of 150 questionnaires "about organizational life" were distributed of which 131 usable questionnaires (response rate 87%) were returned in a sealed envelope to ensure confidentiality along with a separate paper detailing the respondents' phone number. We made follow-up phone calls to the respondents to thank them again for their participation and to fully debrief them.

Each supervisor was presented with two sets of six statements adapted from the Need to Belong Questionnaire items (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2001). The first set of six statements all indicated high NTB, for example: "Please write down the name of the employee who most wants other people to accept him/her". Supervisors were then informed that the subordinate best described by those statements would now be referred to as "Employee Q", and the supervisors had to indicate their enactment of fair procedures toward "Employee Q" (see below). Next, this whole procedure was repeated with a set of reversed statements to indicate low NTB. An example of such a statement is "Please write down the name of the employee who does not particularly want other people to accept him/her". The subordinate identified as low NTB was called "Employee Z" in the remainder of the questionnaire and supervisors reported their procedural fairness behavior toward this employee.

As a check for follower NTB, we asked participants at the end of the questionnaire to rate both followers Q and Z on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 100 (very strongly) to what extent each subordinate 'desired to belong'.

*Procedural fairness.* Respondents indicated, when decisions regarding Q or Z had to be made, to what extent they "allowed them to voice their opinion", "based the decision on the most complete and accurate information possible", "devoted extra attention to making this decision fairly with regard to this person", and "took great care treating this person as fairly as possible" (2 x 4 items, rated on a seven-point Likert scale,  $\alpha_Q = .62$  and  $\alpha_Z = .65$ ). The

average score for these four items for Q and Z was taken as an indicator of procedural rule adherence.

*Leader empathy.* We used the same items for dispositional Empathy as in Study 1 and 2, which were rated on five-point scales ( $\alpha = .74$ ;  $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = .57$ ).

*Control variables.* We controlled for the effects of supervisor sex, organizational tenure and work group size since these factors are likely to influence the frequency and duration of interactions among the respondents and the targets (see also Mayer, Nishii, Schneider, & Goldstein, 2007).

### Results

#### *Followers' Need to Belong*

Followers identified as high NTB targets were rated higher in NTB ( $M = 79.35$ ,  $SD = 11.19$ ) than followers identified as low NTB targets ( $M = 43.64$ ,  $SD = 17.61$ ),  $F(1,115) = 26.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .19$ ), revealing the successfulness of our procedure.

#### *Procedural fairness.*

A repeated measures GLM with a single within-subjects variable (procedural fairness toward subordinate high versus low in NTB) and the (centered) continuous variable leader empathy as a covariate, while controlling for sex, tenure and work group size<sup>5</sup>, revealed a significant effect of the repeated measures factor follower NTB,  $F(1, 124) = 6.03$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .05$ , and a significant interaction between leader empathy and subordinate NTB,  $F(1, 124) = 4.77$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .04$ . There was no significant main effect of the between-subject variable leader empathy,  $F(1, 124) = 0.40$ , *ns*,  $\eta^2_p = .00$ . This interaction is plotted in Figure 3 using the guidelines from Judd, Kenny and McClelland (2001), and additional contrast analyses demonstrated that, as expected, leaders high in empathy report higher procedural rule adherence toward targets who are high rather than low in NTB,  $F(1, 124) = 6.09$ ,  $p < .05$ ,

whereas leaders low in empathy are less responsive in terms of procedural fairness to followers' belongingness needs,  $F(1, 124) = 2.83, ns$ .

### *Discussion*

The final study corroborated our previous findings by demonstrating that in organizations, supervisors and particularly those with higher levels of dispositional empathy adapt their procedural rule adherence to fit subordinates' belongingness needs.

### *General Discussion*

While it is important for leaders to treat followers fairly when making decisions (e.g., De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Tyler & De Cremer, 2005; van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Van Knippenberg, 2007; Yukl, 1998), people frequently experience being treated unfairly, suggesting that leaders often fail to act in ways that are considered procedurally fair (Brockner, 2006). To date, only limited research attention has been paid to empirically investigating *leaders'* adherence to procedural justice rules (Brebels et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2007)<sup>6</sup>. Our findings thus represent a contribution to the promising new research direction on the use of fair procedures from the perspective of leaders (Scott et al., 2009).

We investigated whether the psychological motives identified in relational models of procedural fairness, e.g. belongingness needs, can be identified as an antecedent of leaders' enactment of procedural fairness, but particularly so when the enacting leader is high in empathy. In three studies we showed that empathic leaders indeed adapt the enactment of procedural fairness to suit follower belongingness needs. Leaders high in empathy (measured as a trait, or induced by the context) were more inclined to adhere to procedural fairness rules towards followers high rather than low in belongingness needs.

### *Theoretical Implications*

The present study is among the first to empirically investigate leaders' procedural fairness behavior and its antecedents. In developing our predictions we relied on established

relational models of procedural fairness (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992).

Specifically, we proposed that leaders may pay attention to the enactment of fair procedures in an attempt to regulate followers' needs. In line with prior research emphasizing the importance of followers' need to belong in explaining the psychology of procedural fairness (De Cremer & Blader, 2006; De Cremer & Tyler, 2005), we found that follower belongingness needs indeed constitute an antecedent of leaders' adaptation of the enactment of fair procedures. Importantly, leaders' use of procedural fairness in response to perceived followers' needs requires that leaders are able to adequately perceive and respond to the needs of their followers, which suggested that empathy would be an important moderator. In line with this assumption, our results indeed revealed that particularly empathic leaders adapt the adherence to procedural fairness rules to fit with followers' needs.

By investigating the enactment of procedural fairness from the perspective of leaders, the present results thus contribute to a further integration of both the leadership and procedural fairness literatures. This implementation of a leadership perspective within the research area of procedural fairness fits nicely with a call in the literature to bridge the gap between these two distinct research traditions (see van Knippenberg et al., 2007, for a recent review). Indeed, a crucial element of good leadership practice is the ability to influence and motivate subordinates (e.g., Yukl, 1998), a goal that is well achieved by procedural fairness. More importantly, the positive impact of procedural fairness on cooperation is amplified among followers whose individual needs (e.g. high belongingness needs) can be satisfied by fair procedures. On the other hand, procedural fairness will be only loosely or not related to positive outcomes among subordinates with less salient belongingness needs, because fairness does not necessarily appeal to motives that are important to them. Therefore, leaders' adaptation of procedural fairness-related behaviour can be regarded as an attempt to achieve motivation through correctly identifying and responding to followers' needs and should be

considered an important tool for successful leadership (De Cremer, 2006; De Cremer & Tyler, 2005; Tyler & De Cremer, 2005; van Knippenberg et al., 2007).

Our study also represents a dynamic perspective on procedural fairness by its joint focus on the impact of both followers and leader characteristics on the enactment of procedural fairness. As the field of justice is now slowly shifting its attention from followers towards a leader perspective, an inherent danger is that the scales will be tipped the other way (focusing solely on leaders) and that the dynamics of the relationships between supervisors and subordinates and the impact of followers' on leaders' enactment of fairness are neglected. The present finding that the enactment of procedural fairness is a function of both followers' individual belongingness needs as well as leader empathy suggest once more that procedural fairness is not a one-sided process, but instead locates itself in the interaction between the authority and the follower (Cornelis, Van Hiel, & De Cremer, 2011).

#### *Leadership and Empathy*

Our findings revealed that among those in a power position, particularly those high in empathy can and do take into consideration follower's needs and adapt their behavior accordingly. Obviously, we are not claiming that similar differences in terms of empathy would not arise among people who interact with same-status peers, or that there exists a fundamental difference in the role that empathy would play in hierarchical and non-hierarchical relationships. What is interesting here is that our findings, which focus on leaders, touch on a long-standing debate in the research literature on power and interpersonal sensitivity which concerns the issue of whether people in authority positions are better or worse in judging others than people with less power (Mast, Jonas, & Hall, 2009). Indeed, on the one hand, some studies have revealed that people in power positions are not inclined to form detailed impressions of those with less power (i.e., followers, see Fiske, 1993; Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006), probably because they can afford to pay less interest to

their subordinates and often deal with multiple direct subordinates whereas subordinates typically have one direct supervisor. On the other hand, different studies have suggested that individuals in high-power roles might be more sensitive to individuating information than those in low-power roles (e.g. Mast et al., 2009; Overbeck & Park, 2001). However, even though they may be *attentive* to lower-power individuals (Chen, Ybarra, & Kiefer, 2004), powerful individuals have been reported to be less inclined to *respond* to others' needs (Van Kleef et al., 2008). Based on our findings we would speculate that this responsiveness of high power individuals may depend on their trait levels of empathy and/or the context encouraging empathic leadership.

The distinction between attention and responsiveness is especially relevant in the context of empathic leadership. In our studies, we did not obtain a significant main effect of empathy on the manipulation checks of follower's belongingness needs, suggesting that group leaders and supervisors both high and low in empathy can observe differences in belongingness needs in other individuals ("attention"). Moreover, in a pilot study not reported in this paper, we also found a main effect of followers' belongingness needs on cognitions regarding the importance of fair procedures, suggesting that overall, most leaders had some notion that belongingness needs may be satisfied through procedural fairness. More importantly, we consistently found that empathic leaders in particular were both more aware that these needs signal that a follower strongly values procedural fairness, as well as more likely to adapt their behavior and pay more attention to procedural fairness rule adherence in response to these observed needs ("responsiveness"). Empathic leaders also do not necessarily employ more procedurally fair rules in general, since we did not obtain main effects of empathy. Hence, it seems that the effect of followers' belongingness needs on procedural fairness enactment is also context-dependent, with non-empathic leaders requiring more obvious cues to become aware of the relational implications of fair procedures and to

ascertain an appropriate response to followers belongingness needs in terms of enacting fair procedures. Our results further corroborate earlier findings showing that empathic concern does not only invoke altruistic motivations to satisfy the needs of another, but also results in appropriate behavior, this time in the procedural fairness arena (e.g. Batson 1991; Davis 1996; Eisenberg 2000; Eisenberg et al. 1989).

Before we elaborate on the practical implications of our findings, we need to address the issue whether leader's attempts to accommodate their responses to followers' needs through procedural fairness is actually fair in itself. Indeed, the present results imply that the most 'effective' strategy could be to differentiate between subordinates, which may be interpreted as procedurally unfair since it violates the procedural fairness rule of consistency. However, although we recognize the legitimacy of this interpretation, we believe there are at least two arguments that could refute this reasoning. First, although inconsistent treatment of employees is often considered procedurally unfair, a needs-based allocation of 'resources' has been more prevalent in interdependent situations where there is a stronger focus on personal development and when the resources that are being allocated are not money or status but, for example, information (Elliott & Meeker, 1986; Mannix, Neale, & Northcraft, 1995; Parks, Conlon, Ang, & Bontempo, 1999). Secondly, adhering to a fairness rule can be favorable for those who value it, but not *unfavorable* for those who do not consider it particularly important (Skitka, 2009), suggesting that differential treatment is not necessarily considered unfair. Future research may nevertheless want to address whether leader's systematic enactment of fair procedures towards some employees but not others would undermine and demotivate those other employees in the long run. However, given that "there are many situations when firms should *not* treat everyone the same procedurally" (Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2001, p. 139) and "when it comes to procedural fairness, more is not always better than less"

(Brockner, Wiesenfeld & Diekmann, 2009, p. 185), taking into account followers' needs might help to achieve a more *effective* justice practice in organizations.

#### *Practical Implications*

From an applied point of view, fairness research focussing on when and why leaders adhere to procedural fairness rules should also provide helpful pointers that might ultimately serve as guidelines to develop effective fairness training programs for leaders. Our results suggest that the leader's responsiveness to followers' needs is motivated not only by his/her awareness of the others' needs but particularly facilitated by leaders' empathic concern. In a related vein, Patient and Skarlicki (2010) have looked into managers' enacted interactional justice when communicating bad news and found this to be influenced by empathy, and Scott and colleagues (2009) propose perspective taking as a motive that should facilitate managers' adherence to justice rules. An interesting feature in our studies concerns the finding that we replicated similar effects with empathy at either the dispositional and situational level. Hence, it seems that regardless of people's trait levels of empathic concern, a situation reinforcing or requiring empathic leadership may also stimulate leaders to adapt their fairness rule adherence to suit followers' needs. However, this also means that an environment that constrains empathic leadership may set limits to what extent leaders will feel able to adapt their behaviour to optimally motivate followers according to their individual needs.

This latter finding presents interesting perspectives on educational programs aimed at increasing managers' effectiveness. Whereas a limited number of studies have demonstrated considerable effects of training leaders in 'principles of fairness', it seems a valid strategy to extend these training programs to focus on empathy and the importance of empathic leadership. Although countless leader development programs stress the importance of empathic skills in a leader (Day, 2000; Goleman, 2004), the link with an increased motivation

to employ fair procedures to suit followers' needs has not been incorporated in these more general management training programs and therein lies a valuable application of our findings.

#### *Limitations and Strengths*

A major strength of this study is that we succeeded in investigating leaders' regulation of followers' needs and empathy as a moderator of procedural justice rule adherence across three studies, including laboratory and field study methodologies, each with different strengths and limitations. One limitation of this study that might be addressed in future research is that although we examined both voice (Studies 1 and 2) as well as broader measures of procedural rule adherence (Study 3), at the moment it is not clear whether leaders would be more inclined to adapt certain elements of procedural fairness (e.g., voice, correctability, etc.) to suit followers' needs compared to other procedural 'rules'. Another limitation is that we did not include mediation variables in our study. A promising way to proceed in subsequent research is to include process variable (like, for instance, likability of the target, see Cornelis et al., 2012) in a mediated moderation model.

We conclude by referring to Ward (1998) to emphasize the relevance of the issues studied here: "Given that organizations are permeated with interdependent relationships, the effective use of power relies on the interaction of the target's needs and the ability of the power source to fulfill these needs" (p. 364). Hence, in order to fully understand leader effectiveness, an important task for future researchers is to study antecedents and influences on those leader behaviors that are able to regulate the needs of followers, in this case, by leaders' adherence to procedural fairness rules (Liedtka, 1999).

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## Footnotes

1. A pilot study indicated that the target B was perceived as significantly different in terms of NTB in these two conditions.
2. There is some degree of conceptual confound between 'willingness to grant voice' and 'willingness to devote more time', since giving people the chance to voice their opinion often costs time. However, controlling for overall 'willingness to stay in the laboratory' (based on 'voice' ratings towards the non-target group member) did not meaningfully change the results.
3. We also included questions a, b, and c for the other 'group member'. However, since these questions do not give any information on leaders' inclination to give voice to the target, these were not included in the Principal Components analysis.
4. This text was adapted from a pilot study demonstrating the effectiveness of the empathic leadership manipulation as indicated by items such as "If you were to follow these recommendations, to what extent would you aim to make your subordinates feel understood?"
5. There was also a significant between subject effect of work group size,  $F(1, 124) = 7.02, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .05$ , as well as a significant interaction between the repeated measures factor and work group size,  $F(1, 124) = 10.82, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .08$ . Although supervisors from larger work groups reported treating their employees overall more procedurally fair than supervisors of small work groups, leaders in smaller work groups in particular report differentiating fairness behavior towards subordinates with high or low NTB. The between-subjects effect of sex,  $F(1, 124) = .14, ns, \eta^2_p = .00$  and tenure,  $F(1, 124) = 1.85, ns, \eta^2_p = .02$ , and the interactions of these variables with the repeated measures factor ( $F(1, 124) = 1.17, ns, \eta^2_p = .01$  and  $F(1, 124) = .10, ns, \eta^2_p = .00$  for respectively leader sex and tenure) were not significant. Removing sex and tenure from the analysis reported in the text did not meaningfully alter our conclusions.

6. A number of contributions have focused on interactional fairness as a dependent variable (see Folger & Skarlicki, 2001; Korsgaard, Roberson, & Rymph, 1998; Margolis & Molinsky, 2008; Patient & Skarlicki, 2010; Scott et al., 2007) or distributive fairness (see Georgeson & Harris, 2006), but these types of fairness are conceptually and empirically independent from procedural fairness (see Colquitt, 2001)

Met opmaak: Engels (V.S.)

Figure Captions

*Figure 1*

Average Voice toward High and Low NTB Followers, Contingent on Leaders' Dispositional Empathic Concern in Study 1.

*Figure 2*

Average Voice toward High and Low NTB Followers, Contingent on Leaders' Dispositional Empathic Concern in Study 2.

*Figure 3*

Average Self-reported Procedural Fairness toward High and Low NTB Followers, Contingent on Leaders' Dispositional Empathic Concern in Study 3.

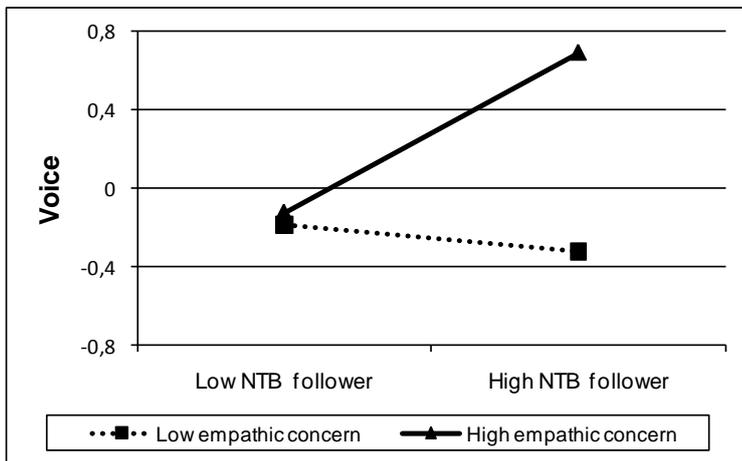


Figure 1

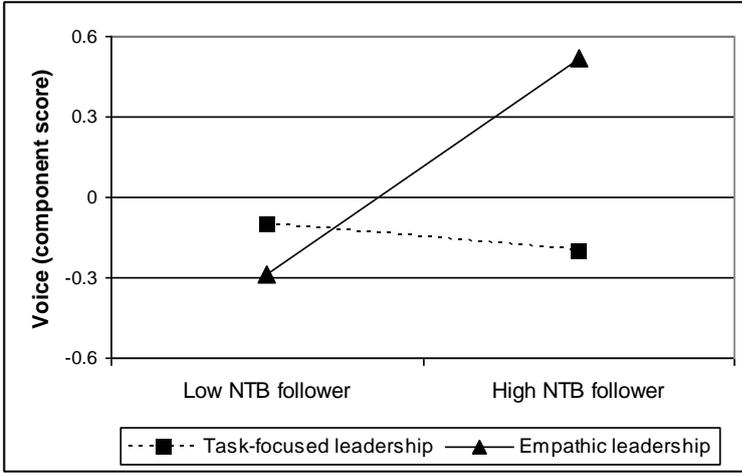


Figure 2

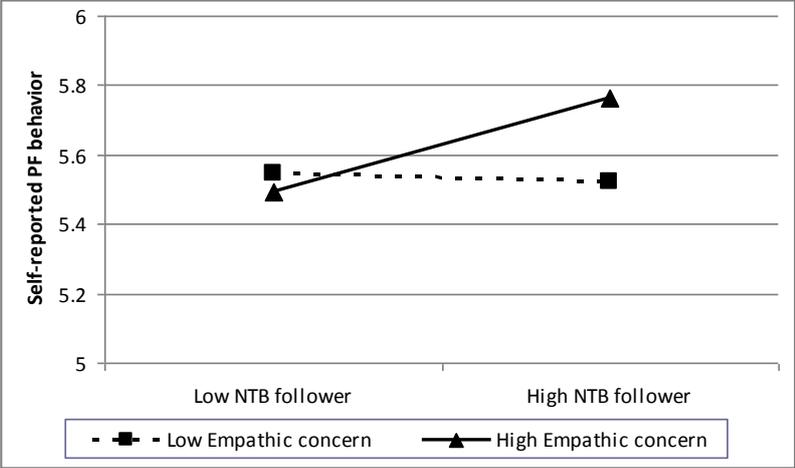


Figure 3