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Melvin J. Lerner and Susan Clayton

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## 1

## Contesting the Primacy of Self-Interest

For more than fifty years, prominent social psychologists have portrayed the pursuit of self-interest as the primary motivating force in people's lives. This perspective is common among the general public, in which it is often taken for granted that people will only do what they are paid or otherwise rewarded for doing. It also reigns among other academic disciplines, such as economics and evolutionary psychology. Although the former focuses on maximizing financial gain, and the latter on maximizing reproductive success, they both take individual self-interest as the fundamental driver of behavior. The primacy of self-interest is an implicit assumption that underlies much public discussion and policy.

Self-interest, however, falls short in explaining some common human behavior and emotional experiences – cases in which people appear to act against their own interest or to feel guilty when their acts promote their interests. Because we will spend the bulk of the book describing and explaining these cases, we start with some illustrative examples. We examine the postdecision consequences experienced by two remarkably different decision makers: corporate managers (Levinson, 1994; Smith, 1994) and caregivers of elderly parents (Brody, 1985; Brody, Dempsey and Pruchno, 1990). In both cases, decisions that negatively affect others, but that have adhered to all the requirements of rational self-interest, have been seen to result in serious emotional consequences for the decision makers. This regret, reluctance, and guilt, we argue, demonstrate the power of the justice motive.

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## ILLUSTRATING THE IMPORTANCE OF JUSTICE

## Corporate Managers

The institutional structures and mechanisms that support thoughtful, “rational” decision making are ubiquitous and are readily apparent in virtually all corporate enterprises. It is a given, and a moral mandate, that all decisions are the products of more or less careful considerations of the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action. Because of this virtually sacred institutionalized practice, corporate executives have been surprised and greatly concerned when the most thorough and extensive use of their thoughtful deliberations did not prevent the postdecision appearance of costly and entirely unanticipated tragic consequences. These consequences include the experience of debilitating, demoralizing levels of shame subsequent to downsizing decisions by many of the managers who were involved. Typically, that demoralization as well as signs of resentment and disaffection also appear among a significant number of the remaining employees (Armstrong-Stassen and Latack, 1992; Brockner, 1990; Kozlowski et al., 1993).

The embarrassing, undeniable fact is that the cost-benefit analyses that preceded the important corporate decision did not include the substantial costs of the “irrational” assessments of harm doing and blame. Their predecision procedures insured that by all the relevant societal standards and rules, no one could be blamed, so no one should feel guilty, ashamed, or resentful. Given the circumstances they were faced with, the publicly affirmed consensus was that they had done what was best for all the relevant stakeholders. They could not have acted otherwise while fulfilling their obligations. So why the postdecision guilt, shame, and/or demoralizing anger?

A closer examination reveals that the essential elements of the critical event include the market-induced or at least market-instigated efforts to reduce costs of production. To accomplish that, the decision

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was reached to downsize by discharging a significant number of otherwise qualified employees. These employees were to be let go with relatively little advance notice and compensating benefits.

To be sure, in each instance the decisions regarding whether or not to reduce costs by downsizing the labor force and how to accomplish this were not arrived at lightly. They occurred only after extensive, elaborate efforts to arrive at the wisest course of action for the corporation and the stakeholders, including the remaining employees. The decisions as to whether and how to downsize were the end product of all reasonable efforts to acquire any relevant information and the subsequent consideration of all available alternatives.

Typically, as a consequence of the extensive deliberations it was openly recognized by all concerned that each employee was let go because the economic realities left the management with no choice. Or at least it was left with no better, wiser, more economically and, thus, morally appropriate course of action. Given that remedial action was required in order to save the organization, it was considered to be the most “fair” or least unfair alternative for all concerned. That was the consensus view of the downsizing affirmed by all levels of management, at least until it actually took place. Once having arrived at the decision to downsize, highly qualified social psychologists were often involved in assisting management in their attempts to devise procedures that conveyed the appearance of being fair to those affected as well as the remaining employees (Greenberg, 1990). Nevertheless, when management informed the designated employees that they were to be discharged and their income shortly would end, many of them, management as well as the employees, experienced a new emotional reality: the compelling effects of the justice imperatives not considered during the decision process.

Apparently, the managers were not prepared for the painful experiences they encountered. The possibility of that happening had not appeared in the deliberations. Why would it have? Management was convinced that what they were doing was in the best interests of

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all the stakeholders, including the remaining employees. Presumably, by the time the employees were informed of their job loss all of the relevant issues had been thoroughly examined, discussed, and factored into shaping the final decisions. Management was convinced that to arrive at any other decision would have been foolish, irresponsible, and even immoral.

But then, as described by a manager involved in a downsizing, “nothing – not over-work, not confusion, not lost perks, not apprehension – is as deadening to managers’ morale as firing subordinates” (Smith, 1994, p. 46). The feelings of guilt for having harmed innocent victims may be recognized: “What makes the flood of dismissals in recent years especially distressing for managers is that so often workers have been fired not for cause but because their skills were no longer needed” (Smith, 1994, p. 2). Did the managers not know that?

All of management knew well in advance that the employees were to be discharged not because of any lack or failure on their parts, but because their skills and efforts were no longer needed in terms of promoting the welfare of the corporate stakeholders, which constituted the “big picture.” A psychologist who has been repeatedly consulted in order to deal with this postimplementation problem described an important factor that had not been considered by management. In his award-winning address to the American Psychological Association he pointed out that:

The conscious guilt any manager of conscience has about terminating someone else without cause is compounded by the unconscious guilt that arises from the sense that he or she is destroying the other. (Levinson, 1994, p. 429)

Apparently, in his extensive consultation with companies that had downsized, Levinson discovered that the managers’ conscious experiences of guilt emanated from cognitive-affective processes of which they were unaware. Because of the preconscious sources of their guilt, those who were demoralized with guilt could not have anticipated or

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easily coped with the painful emotions they were experiencing. Management had gone through considerable prior efforts to insure that the acts that caused others to suffer were entirely rational and appropriate responses to the market conditions with which the managers were faced. Above all, prior to taking the required actions, managers were convinced that, according to the societal norms for assigning blame and culpability, they were not harm doers: they were doing nothing ethically “wrong”; they were merely meeting their obligations.

Why would they have anticipated being overwhelmed with guilt feelings? They had no way of knowing that, after implementing their decisions and being confronted with the suffering of their “victims,” those justifying thoughts could not dispel what they were experiencing. The awareness of an innocent person’s suffering because of something they had done automatically elicited the emotions of someone who had committed a terrible injustice. All that rational norm-based thoughts could do was to make them feel as if they were being “irrational.”

Over time, and for some sooner rather than later, other less painful ways of expressing the compelling justice imperatives might appear in the form of blaming or derogating their victims, or generating illusions that their victims were not victims after all. Those laid off would eventually be fully compensated, even “better off,” in the future (Maes, 1998). But for a considerable period of time the managers joined the employees, their friends, families, and co-workers in suffering for the employees who had been victimized by the corporate decision, the managers’ rational decision that took away the jobs.

### Caregivers for Elderly Parents

The second set of tragedies, similar in dynamics to what has just been described, has appeared among children, typically daughters, of elderly parents. (We explore this situation further in Chapter 9.) In the

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typical scenario studied by Brody (1985), daughters had provided considerable and increasing amounts of daily care for their elderly parents for an extended period of time. Eventually they felt compelled to move their deteriorating parent into a nursing home so that he or she would receive the daily care and supervision required. Similar to the managers involved in downsizing, before deciding to institutionalize their parents the daughters engaged in extensive problem-solving efforts focused on finding the best solution for the parent's well-being. The experts they consulted, physicians, gerontologists, or social workers, explicitly included the consequences of various alternatives for the other "stakeholders" who would be affected by this decision: the caregivers and their immediate families.

To understand the interpersonal and psychological dynamics of this tragic outcome, it is important to recognize the events and circumstances leading up to and following the recommended decision to institutionalize their parents. It begins with an increasingly common event. Elderly parents typically turn to their children, or their children's spouses, for help when they can no longer take care of themselves. In this society, typically, when this occurs a daughter takes on the role of primary care provider or actual caregiver. Eventually, however, the daughters experience considerable and increasing amounts of emotional stress as well as "role" exhaustion. The costly physical and emotional demands of caring for one's elderly parents' daily needs are compounded with the conflicts they create in meeting obligations to one's spouse and children, as well as in continually denying their own needs and desires. These emotional and physical stresses include the anguish of witnessing the unrelieved deterioration and suffering of an especially loved one and, in spite of all the best efforts, his or her increasingly imminent death.

Eventually, with sufficient undeniable evidence of irreversible deterioration, expert professional consultants, as well as family and friends, unanimously recommend that the care providers must place their parents in a nursing home. Typically, the professionals assure care providers that along with providing their parents with the care

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they require, this move will mean that their own stresses will be greatly relieved. The increasingly demanding, often overwhelming burden will have been lifted.

Unfortunately, as Brody (1985; Brody et al., 1990) and others have reported, these previously overstressed and overburdened daughters often do not experience the promised emotional relief when their parents are moved to a nursing facility. Apparently, in response to their parents' continuing deterioration and suffering, the daughters often experience feelings of guilt that were entirely unanticipated. In spite of the enormous sacrifices experienced over the long periods prior to the placement, many of these daughters report feeling more depressed and stressed than they did prior to placing their parents in a caregiving facility. They feel that somehow, in spite of what everyone says, they let their parents down. They failed to protect their parents the way that their parents had nurtured and protected them. Is that irrational?

Any objective observer would be able to offer rational, sensible arguments for why they have no reason to feel guilty. Not only did they not harm nor fail their parents in any way, they continually sought to make the best decision for all concerned, including and especially their elderly parents. Unfortunately, those thoughts and that reasoning reflect only the application of societal norms for determining blameworthiness and culpability and have no direct influence on those preconscious processes that are actually generating the guilt feelings. The preconscious "reality" is that regardless of what occurred up to that point, as the result of "my decision to institutionalize my mother she is now living among strangers and is suffering and very unhappy," and thus "I caused her to suffer." The emotional effects of the preconscious script that "bad outcomes are caused by bad people" may be consciously expressed in various forms: "She is suffering because I am an ungrateful, selfish daughter."

The distressing consequences of the justice imperatives elicited by the daughters' awareness of their parents' continuing suffering may

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lead to various additional reactions. Considerable evidence suggests that “harm doers” may find ways to derogate the victims, attempt to compensate for their harm by gaining moral credits through doing good deeds, or go into denial and try to blot the experience out of their conscious awareness by avoiding the victim (Lerner, 1980). For very understandable reasons, efforts to persuade the guilt-ridden daughters to be rational and come to their senses will accomplish very little in preventing or ameliorating the appearance of any of these reactions.

These examples, along with a vast body of research that we will discuss, lead us to conclude that the desire to be fair is a powerful force that is not suppressed by logical reasoning and that has consequences that are inconsistent with self-interest. It is ironic that so much justice theory has been devoted to explaining why the justice motive arises from self-interest.

#### A BRIEF REVIEW OF JUSTICE THEORY

Although language conventions offer several related terms for the form of justice that appears in various contexts – *fairness*, *deservingness*, *entitlement* – the common element is an “ought” imperative that is experienced preconsciously or cognitively represented as courses of action linking people with their outcomes and the appropriate treatment of one another. Early justice theorists recognized that there could be more than one way of defining justice. For example, justice could prescribe that all individuals receive equal outcomes, outcomes in proportion to their input, or outcomes in proportion to their need. How is the operative rule determined? Walster, Walster, and Berscheid (1978, p. 6), integrating the perspectives of earlier influential theorists (see, e.g., Adams, 1963; Homans, 1958), asserted “Individuals will try to maximize their outcomes” as the first proposition in their General Theory of Social Interaction. The assumed dominance of self-interest shaped their view of how the desire for justice appeared

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in people's lives. They, for example, derived the predictions that individuals, in their omnipresent efforts to maximize their outcomes, will naturally select and promote the rule of fairness that offers them the greatest benefits, or, if they believe it is more profitable they will simply ignore any considerations of fairness.

Similarly, Deutsch (1975) in a highly cited essay, "Equity, Equality, and Need: What Determines Which Value Will Be Used as the Basis of Distributive Justice," observed that people, in each encounter, naturally adopt the rule of justice that they believe will promote their values or goals. This instrumentally self-serving theme also appears in the proposal by Messick and his colleagues (see, e.g., Messick and Sentis, 1983), that in every encounter people initially decide what outcomes they prefer and then elect a rule of deservingness that offers the best promise of justifying their most preferred outcomes.

Later, several investigators (e.g., Lind and Tyler, 1988) in their efforts to present a theory of procedural justice as distinct from distributive justice, tried to demonstrate that a desire for fair treatment is not only different from but also can supplement and override a desire for fair outcomes. However, they also located people's desire to be treated fairly in self-interested motives (Brockner and Wiesenfeld, 1996). Their explanation for why people become upset when they are treated unfairly, especially by those in authority, pointed to the implied lack of respect, leading to a loss in public esteem. They then tied the fear of lowered public esteem to the potential loss of access to those desired material resources that are mediated by their status as a bona fide member of their group (see, e.g., Tyler, 1994; Tyler and Blader, 2003). Supposedly, people become upset by unfair treatment because of the implied threat to their ability to get what they want, that is, to maximize their outcomes.

More recent theorists reinforced this consensus by identifying automatic and preconscious processes to explain how self-interest acquires its dominating and controlling influence. According to Moore and Loewenstein (2004):

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Self-interest is automatic, viscerally compelling and often unconscious . . . the automatic nature of self-interest gives it a primal power to influence judgment, and make it difficult for people to understand its influence on their judgment, let alone eradicate its influence. (p. 189)

Similarly, echoing the automatic and primary themes, Epley and Caruso (2004) argue that

First, people are automatically inclined to interpret their perceptions egocentrically. Second, people are automatically inclined to evaluate those egocentric interpretations as good or bad, positive or negative, threatening or supporting. Finally, moral judgments about fairness and unfairness are based upon these automatic evaluative responses. (pp. 181–2)

Skitka et al. (2009) have offered an updated version of Deutsch's (1975) and Walster et al.'s (1978) assumption that people's goals and values determine how they employ considerations of justice. Skitka proposes to integrate the research literatures on distributive and procedural justice along with her work on moral mandates within the same theoretical framework. In this model, people's justice judgments reflect perspectives that are elicited by their "goals activated in current memory." According to Skitka, those goals can involve material needs and the social exchange of material resources, which lead people to adopt a perspective to promote rational self-interest; social concerns based on the need to belong to a group and concerns about social status, which cause the person to be concerned with fairness of procedures; and, completing the triumvirate of motives and perspectives, fundamental beliefs about right or wrong, or moral mandates, which require people to evaluate fairness in accordance with those beliefs.

Skitka's theory encompasses multiple motives. Although it affirms that people care about morality for reasons independent of self-interested needs, it still portrays most justice motives as arising from self-interest and specifically defines justice decisions in many cases as based on people's economic and/or social wants and needs. We will say