

Procedural justice in the courts



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October 2022

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**EVIDENCE
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Why read this evidence review?

Procedural justice concerns the treatment of members of the public by those in positions of power within the criminal justice system, such as police officers, prison officers and court officials. According to procedural justice theory, members of the public who experience fair decision-making and considerate and inclusive treatment are more likely to accept the outcomes of the criminal justice processes in which they are involved and to regard the justice system as legitimate.

This review covers a wide range of issues including:

- What procedural justice means
- Why procedural justice matters
- The limitations of procedural justice
- Emerging evidence on procedural justice in the courts
- Practical steps for enhancing procedural justice in the courts, based on real-life examples from the authors' own research.

Introduction

This evidence review examines the evidence base for procedural justice in the courts. It starts by explaining what procedural justice is and why it matters, with reference to the large amount of evidence on policing. We then consider the emerging research on procedural justice in the courts and provide examples, drawn from our own empirical studies, of how procedural justice may be achieved in practice in the courts. Our review primarily focuses on research conducted in the criminal courts, however, much of what is discussed is applicable to other kinds of court and tribunal settings.

What is procedural justice?

Procedural justice has become a prominent theme within the study of criminal justice systems in the last 25 years (Tankebe, 2013; Hough, 2021). Closely associated with the work of Tom Tyler (2006; 2007; 2011), procedural justice concerns the way in which members of the public who come into contact with criminal justice institutions, such as the police, prisons and courts, are treated by those in authority. Procedural justice comprises two main features:

- 1 Quality of decision-making (such as fair and neutral decision-making)
- 2 Quality of treatment (such as polite and respectful treatment) (Tyler, 2006).

Why does procedural justice matter?

Procedural justice is regarded as important for several reasons. It is argued that if members of the public feel that they have been treated fairly and respectfully by those in positions of authority, and are given the opportunity to express their views, they will be more willing to accept the outcome, even if the outcome is unfavourable to them (Tyler, 2007; Hough and Sato, 2011).

Researchers have also found that procedural justice is closely connected to the concept of legitimacy. It is argued that for states and institutes to maintain a valid claim to authority they need to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of those they serve (Beetham, 2013; Tyler, 2006). Legitimacy thus sets limits on the power of authorities (Loader and Sparks, 2013; Jackson et al. 2015) and provides a stronger basis for authority than the use of power alone (Tyler, 2006; Pósch et al. 2021). A vast body of research has found that procedural justice contributes to citizens' perceptions of criminal justice authorities as legitimate (for example, Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 2006; Jackson et al. 2012; Hough et al. 2013). In other words, if individuals believe that they have been treated fairly by the authority in question, they are more likely to view it as legitimate.

It is argued that, in turn, legitimacy motivates cooperation with authorities, including compliance with the law, and 'discretionary cooperation' such as reporting crime to the police or acting as a witness in court (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Murphy et al. 2022). This cooperation is normatively grounded: that is, it is voluntary and based on shared moral or ethical beliefs between citizens and authorities, rather than being instrumentally motivated by incentives or fear of sanction (Tyler, 2006; Jackson et al. 2012; Hough et al. 2013). Further, it is argued that procedural justice can contribute to a sense of shared social identity between citizens and authorities (Bradford et al. 2014; Murphy et al. 2022; Kyprianides et al. 2022).

Most research into procedural justice, including nearly all of the research cited above, has been conducted in the field of policing. This is perhaps because police are 'the most visible agent of the criminal justice system' (Hunter and Jacobson, 2021: 5). Only a small amount of research to date has focused on other criminal justice institutions, such as prisons (for a review, see Ryan and Bergin, 2022), probation (Blasko and Taxman, 2018) or – the main focus of this paper - the courts.

Are there any drawbacks?

Procedural justice involves those in positions of power (e.g. criminal justice professionals working within the police, prisons and courts) treating those in subordinate positions (e.g. members of the public, such as defendants, suspects, victims and witnesses) fairly, respectfully and with dignity. There are no obvious drawbacks to this.

However, some academics have argued that some of the claims regarding the impact of procedural justice may have been overstated. This particularly concerns the extent to which procedural justice (via legitimacy) supports compliance with authorities (Johnson et al. 2014; Nagin and Telep, 2020). For example, Savigar-Shaw et al. (2021) found rather than procedurally just approaches necessarily driving people to cooperate, police officers employed procedural justice principles as a 'reward' to those who were already cooperating with them. Others have argued that procedural justice may have limited impact when the 'social distance' (Braithwaite, 2013) between those in authority and individual citizens is large, such as, among those who have disengaged from authorities (Murphy, 2016). For example, this can sometimes be the case between the police and minority ethnic group members (Murphy and Cherney, 2012).

Research has also found that mandating and being highly prescriptive about the adoption of procedural justice can be counter productive. For example, when police officers were given specific instructions on how to apply procedural justice approaches during interactions with citizens, citizens were less satisfied with the interaction than when officers had greater discretion in this regard (MacQueen and Bradford, 2015; Pósch et al. 2021).

Nevertheless, the evidence base for procedural justice remains robust and the above limitations should be viewed with this in mind. This includes by recognising the 'social value' (Nagin and Telep, 2020: 761) brought by treating people in a procedurally just manner, especially in terms of fostering social inclusion (Bradford et al. 2014; Murphy et al. 2022; Kyprianides et al. 2022).

Procedural justice in the courts: evidence base

There is a small but growing evidence base on procedural justice in the courts. As with existing research in policing, this research points towards the value of promoting procedurally just interactions between lay users (such as victims, witnesses and defendants) and court-based professionals (such as the judiciary, legal professionals and court staff). Research in the United States has found that procedural justice in the courts can help to increase the acceptance of decisions made by the courts, promote cooperation with rulings, and contribute to citizens' positive perceptions of the courts (Tyler, 2007; Tyler and Huo, 2002; Benesh and Howell, 2001). The use of procedural justice approaches is also a way of moderating the often harsh realities of the adversarial process because 'fair procedures lead to a concern about delivering gains to all parties rather than winning over others' (Tyler, 2007: 27).

In England and Wales, research has found that procedural justice can contribute to perceptions of the courts as legitimate (Jacobson et al. 2015) and can promote a more inclusive 'court culture' (Kirby, 2017). In the Netherlands, Grootelaar and van den Bos (2018) found that procedural justice was positively associated with trust in judges when the outcomes received were favourable to defendants, but even more so when the outcomes were unfavourable. In Canada, Sprott and Greene (2010) found that young defendants' perceptions of how they were treated by their lawyer and the judge impacted on their views of the legitimacy of the courts.

Recent findings suggest that professionals working within the courts are coming to recognise the value of interacting with lay users in a procedurally just manner. Hunter and Jacobson (2021) found that magistrates and those working within the youth justice system adopted a range of strategies for engaging with young defendants that adhere to the principles of procedural justice. Meanwhile, Kirby (2020) found that professionals and practitioners across a range of court and tribunal settings recognised the importance of treating lay users in a procedurally just manner.

What does procedural justice in the courts look like?

Tyler (2007: 30) identified four main features of procedural justice in the courts:

- 1 **Voice:** lay users should have the opportunity to 'tell their side of the story' before decisions are made
- 2 **Neutrality:** decisions should be made by neutral decision-makers who follow legal rules in a consistent and transparent manner
- 3 **Respect:** lay users should be treated with respect by all those involved in the court process
- 4 **Trust:** the character of the decision-maker is important to people's perceptions of legal authorities, therefore, lay users should feel as though they are treated in a sincere and considerate manner and that they are listened to and treated without prejudice by those in authority.

These principles have been reiterated elsewhere in the literature, with some important reflections and caveats. Ansems et al (2020) found that defendants also regard accuracy on the part of judges and prosecutors (demonstrated through being prepared and taking care over the case), and feeling confident that all relevant information has been taken into account, as important features of procedural justice. Others have pointed to some of the limitations of achieving procedural justice principles in practice. Savigar-Shaw et al. (2021) found that the principles of neutrality and voice are potentially in tension, with the police sometimes placing limits on the 'voice' of detainees to achieve neutrality. An example of this includes officers discouraging detainees from explaining the circumstances of the alleged offence in the custody suite to protect their right to silence. This chimes with existing research in the courts which has pointed to the limits imposed on lay court users' 'voice' by legal and structural factors inherent in the adversarial courts system. Notably, for example, rules of evidence prevent witnesses from 'telling their story' in the manner they wish to (Rock, 1993; Fielding, 2006; Shapland and Hall, 2010; Jacobson et al. 2015; Kirby, 2017; Kirby, 2019).

Procedural justice in the courts: lessons from the field

Based on our own research (Jacobson et al. 2015; Kirby, 2017; Kirby, 2019; Jacobson and Cooper, 2020), involving interviews with lay users and observations of court proceedings, we have identified several ways in which procedurally just treatment might be achieved in practice in the courts. These are listed below, along with some illustrative quotes and observed case summaries.

1. Promoting inclusive, supportive and humanising interactions

As a general principle, professionals and practitioners should interact with lay users in ways which are inclusive, humanising and supportive. This includes by helping lay users to understand and navigate proceedings and to feel that not only do they have a voice but that their voice is listened to. Also important is the avoidance of complex language and jargon, and reduction of ritual and formality.

Direct communication between defendant and district judge in magistrates' court hearing

This was a sentencing hearing for a case of theft in which the defendant, a man with problems with alcohol, had pleaded guilty to stealing clothes from a retail store. The case had appeared before the court the previous month, however, the judge had deferred sentencing because the treatment service that the defendant had been due to engage with had not been able to see him in time.

During the hearing, the judge communicated directly with the defendant about his progress, which included having accessed treatment services, registered for vocational training and secured hostel accommodation. For example:

J: *First of all, well done. Secondly, how do you feel coming to court today [compared to] last time?*

D: *Much better.*

Upon sentencing D to a community order with a rehabilitation activity requirement, the following exchange ensued:

J: *Well done, you've shown willing, I'm not going to lock you up. ... If you lapse again and come back we can look at the reasons for it ... But, ultimately we need to give shop owners protection.*

D: *Thank you very much for remembering me.*



2. Avoiding belittling cross-examination

The nature of the adversarial system means that victims, witnesses and defendants giving evidence may be subject to robust and rigorous cross-examination. However, questions have been raised about the acceptability of sarcastic or aggressive cross-examination (see Kirby, 2017 for a review). The findings of our research suggest that lay users can find the tone and manner of cross-examination, as difficult as, or even more difficult than, the questions themselves. For example, a victim in a Crown Court case involving sexual assault and other violent offences, understood the right of the defence to cross-examine her, but found the advocate's gestures off-putting:

"I [knew the defence advocate had] to cross-examine me but he was a bit smarmy like making faces and stuff. He didn't really need to do that. Like obviously he's defending [his client] but you don't need to pull faces when you ask me questions."

Advocates who follow the principles of procedural justice would be aware of the importance of avoiding the use of sarcastic or belittling remarks by counsel.

3. Minimising 'banter' between professionals

Findings from our research suggest that court-based professionals should be mindful of the impact on court users of overt displays of camaraderie, or banter, during breaks in proceedings. Jokes and banter can not only make court users feel excluded, but also that the seriousness of proceedings is undermined.

For example, a defendant in a Crown Court case spoke of being bemused when, during a break in proceedings, he overheard his advocate discuss attending a Christmas lunch with the prosecution advocate:

"When I got the gist of that ... I was very unhappy ... How can you be friends with the opposition?"

4. Ensuring that lay users are informed at all stages of the process, including about waiting and delays

Findings from our research indicate that being kept informed is of utmost importance to lay users. This includes by being provided with updates and information before, during and after the court appearance and having their questions answered fully. For example, a witness described how the support he received from a Witness Service volunteer and court usher helped him to understand the process and made him feel included:

"[When] I went to reception, [a Witness Service volunteer] came to greet me – really friendly – asked "Is this your first time?", and because I was there quite early they actually had a map of the court and showed me round. So, I had an idea, I guess, of where people would be sitting. You don't really get the idea of the content and the size and the dimensions of the size or how small it is and that type of stuff [otherwise] ... The staff were amazing ... The usher [who] came and fetched me was lovely – she was really, really friendly."

These comments also highlight the role that voluntary organisations involved in the court process, such as the Witness Service, can play in ensuring that lay users feel supported and treated with care.

Waiting and delays often feature prominently in the experience of lay users and cause considerable frustration. This can be mitigated if practitioners at least acknowledge the impact of delay, even if they are unable to prevent it from occurring.

Conclusion

This review has outlined the evidence base for procedural justice in the courts. Drawing on existing research, we have summarised the key components of procedural justice and why it matters, and identified practical steps for enhancing procedurally just interactions in the courts. The evidence suggests that procedurally just approaches are likely to ease some of the difficulties, stress and anxiety associated with attending court as a defendant, witness or victim, and contribute to perceptions of the courts and wider justice system as legitimate.

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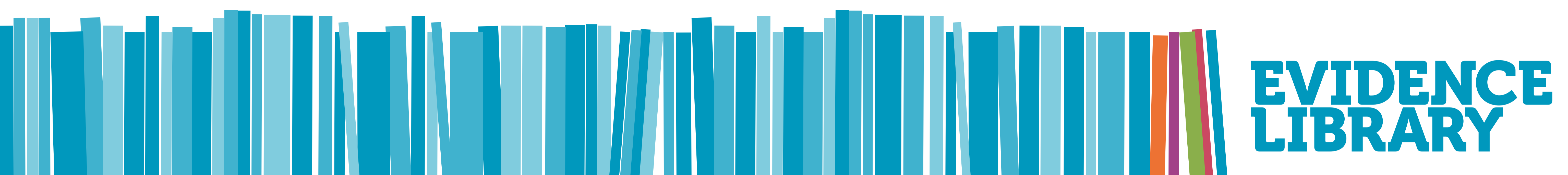
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An online evidence base for the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system

This article forms part of a series from Clinks, created to develop a far-reaching and accessible evidence base covering the most common types of activity undertaken within the criminal justice system. There are two main aims of this online series:

- 1 To increase the extent to which the voluntary sector bases its services on the available evidence base
- 2 To encourage commissioners to award contracts to organisations delivering an evidence-based approach.

Each article has been written by a leading academic with particular expertise on the topic in question. The topics are selected by Clinks' members as areas of priority interest. With the support of Russell Webster, Clinks is working towards building a comprehensive directory of the best evidence available across a wide range of criminal justice topics.

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