CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Justice in organizational systems is important from at least two perspectives. One view argues that justice is an important end in itself -- a virtue that organizations should pursue (e.g., Rawl’s, 1971). Another more pragmatic perspective, considers justice in organizational settings important because of the negative consequences that result in its absence (e.g., Adams, 1965; Crosby, 1984). These views are complementary to the extent that a just workplace is a desirable goal. Proceeding from that goal, research over the past two decades has focused on the antecedents of justice in organizational settings.

Early research in organizational justice has focused on two primary constructs: distributive and procedural justice. Distributive justice, based on Adam’s equity theory (1965), generally refers to a perception of fairness that emerges as employees react to a distributive decision or outcome. Specifically, this research has focused on the perceived fairness of outcomes, such as pay or performance appraisals (see e.g., Deutsch, 1985 for a review). Although important, the study of distributive justice provides only a partial understanding of organizational justice. Theorists have also recognized that procedural justice is important. This construct refers to the perceived fairness of the process or procedures used to determine organizational outcomes (see Folger & Greenberg, 1985; Lind & Tyler, 1988 for reviews). Early studies demonstrated that the fairness of the procedures used were critically important in determining a person’s reaction to legal trials.
(e.g., Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Since then, procedural fairness has since proven to very important in organizational contexts as well (Lind & Tyler, 1988).

More recently, interactional justice has been receiving attention. This form of justice is defined as the quality of interpersonal treatment that people expect to receive (Bies, 1987; Bies & Moag, 1986; Tyler & Bies, 1990). Much of the research on this construct has generally focused on how leaders treat their subordinates [recent evidence suggests that subordinates consider their leaders as an important source of fairness in addition to the formal policies and procedures established by the organization (Cobb, Vest, Hills, Frey, & Tarnoff, 1991; Cobb, Vest, Hills, in press)]. This “treatment” is manifested in both the content of the messages conveyed by leaders, and the conduct of their behavior, such as courtesy, respect (Bies et al., 1988; Cobb, 1992; Tyler & Lind, 1992), or how policies and procedures are implemented (Bies & Tyler, 1993; Cobb, 1992; Cobb & Frey, 1996; Greenberg, 1990; Tyler and Bies, 1990).

Most of the interactional justice research has concentrated on how agents manage subordinate anger and resentment created by seemingly unjust behavior or unfavorable outcomes (Bies, 1987). This work has focused on “social accounts”, or the explanations that are delivered to subordinates to manage their perceptions and reactions to an event.

One of the primary issues in the study of social accounts concerns the factors that make them effective. Research has shown that social accounts have an impact on perceptions of fairness, but only if they are “adequate” in the mind of the receiver (Bies & Shapiro, 1987; Shapiro, 1991, Shapiro, et al, 1994). It still remains unclear what makes
an account “acceptable”. The purpose of this study is to address this issue within the context of leader-subordinate relations. There are at least two major issues to be explored with regard to this objective. The first issue is to identify important types of factors or dimensions under the control of an agent that enhance the acceptance of an account. The second issue is to determine the conditions under which specific factors are most important.

The practical significance of enhancing account acceptance rests on the findings that adequate accounts tend to mitigate negative reactions and enhance perceptions of fairness. This suggests that the “acceptance” of an account acts as a mediator between the delivery of an account and recipient reactions to it. However, only two studies to date have formally addressed the mediating potential of account adequacy (Bies and Shapiro, 1987 -- study 2; Shapiro, 1991). Therefore, a third issue in this study is to examine the mediating effect of account acceptability between the persuasive factors of an account and subordinate perceptions and reactions to it.

Research on the factors within social accounts is still in its infancy. As such, there is little theoretical guidance to suggest the types of factors that might be critical in account acceptance. Since the purpose of an account is to manage or change subordinate attitudes, it is appropriate to consider research focused on attitude change through persuasive communications. Therefore, selected research in this area was reviewed and integrated with the social accounts literature. First, the key concepts and critical issues in the social accounts literature are identified and the relevant research is reviewed. Second,
the persuasion literatures are discussed with the purpose of identifying factors appropriate for accounts and situations under which those factors are most effective. Specifically, the message learning approach (e.g., Hovland et al., 1953) was reviewed to help identify relevant factors; and the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984) was examined with regard to conditions under which various factors might be most effective.

**The Social Accounts Perspective**

Social accounts are “statements made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior” (Scott & Lyman, 1968). The objective of a social account is to change a potentially negative perception of an agent’s behavior to one that is more acceptable (Blumstein, Carssow, Hall, Hawkins, Hoffman, Ishem, Maurer, Spens, Taylor, & Zimmerman, 1974). The study of social accounts can be traced back to Goffman’s (1952; 1971) emphasis on “talk” as a way for a harmdoer to “cool out the mark” (i.e., calm the offended party). Bies (1987) suggests that accounts are used to “minimize the apparent severity” of the event, or to convince those affected that “the wrongful act is not a fair representation of what the actor is really like as a person.” In other words, successful accounts have at least two major effects: They reduce the negative consequences that follow undesirable or unjust behavior, and they help the harmdoer maintain a more positive image (Cobb, 1992; Greenberg, 1990; and Schlenker, 1980).

Those effects have some important implications for management. Consider the consequences of managerial actions that lead to negative outcomes. When an employee views a leader’s actions as leading to negative outcomes, and perceives the leader to be
directly responsible (i.e., better choices were available), then he/she is likely to evaluate the fairness of the behavior. If the behavior is considered unfair, then the subordinate may well become angry or even “morally outraged” by what the leader has done (Bies, 1987). These feelings of anger, in turn, create a “predicament” for the offending agent. For example, perceptions of unfair treatment may result in distrust of authority (Tyler & Lind, 1992), or conflict between the parties if not handled appropriately (Bies et al., 1988). Furthermore, the reactions to this type of conflict may lead to a wide range of consequences from simple disapproval (Bies & Shapiro, 1987) to more serious consequences such as employee theft (Greenberg, 1990). Research shows that social accounts can mitigate these negative outcomes (Sitkin & Bies, 1993).

Social accounts take many forms, and several classifications have been proposed. For example, Scott and Lyman (1968) suggested that there were two basic types of accounts: excuses and justifications (more comprehensive typologies, however, have been developed; e.g., Bies, 1987). When giving excuses, the individual admits the wrongfulness of the behavior and its negative effects, but denies full responsibility for it. Excuses are also referred to as “causal accounts” because they attempt to deny or shift causal responsibility (Bies, 1977). For example, a manager citing “global competition” as a reason for downsizing, is using a causal account by attempting to minimize personal responsibility by shifting it to an external source. The use of such an account can also be construed as a form of impression management, in that the agent attempts to maintain a more favorable personal image (Greenberg, 1990).
In contrast, justifications admit responsibility for a harmful decision or behavior, but deny the wrongfulness of it; they reframe the undesired outcomes in a more positive way. In so doing, they attempt to change a negative attitude towards the behavior to one that is more positive. Justifications are particularly relevant in a modern organizational context because managers are frequently called upon to enact unpopular decisions, such as wage freezes, new standards, and procedural changes. Although it might make life temporarily more pleasant for a manager to blame an external source (since employees no longer direct their anger at the messenger), the anger towards the action still persists; and the blame may shift toward some other agent (such as the organization). Employees are unlikely to embrace these types of changes if they continue to view them negatively, and negative consequences for the organization may be more likely to persist. Justifications, on the other hand, attempt to change employee attitudes towards the action. To the extent that such a justification is successful, then the anger should be ameliorated and replaced with a more favorable attitude. For example, when a manager implements procedural changes, an “acceptable” justification should enhance employee attitudes towards those changes.

**Research on Social Accounts.** Several empirical studies have focused on the effects of accounts or excuses given by managers on the perceptions of peers and subordinates (Bies & Moag, 1986; Bies & Shapiro, 1987; Giacalone & Pollard, 1988; Weiner et al., 1987; and Weiner, Figueroa-Muñoz, & Kakihara, 1991). Specifically, it has been reported that the use of causal accounts leads to greater perceptions of
interactional justice (Bies & Moag, 1986), procedural justice and approval of the harmdoer (Bies & Shapiro, 1987), lowers complaints to the harmdoer’s boss (Folger & Martin, 1986), and reduces anger towards the harmdoer (Bies & Shapiro, 1987; Weiner et al., 1987; & Weiner et al., 1991). However, it has also been demonstrated that the mere use of an account is insufficient to produce these outcomes; the account must also be perceived to be “adequate”.

The “adequacy” of the account appears to be the key variable explaining the effectiveness of an account. Bies & Shapiro (1987) reported that the perceived adequacy of a causal account (blaming “poor economic conditions”) was significantly more important than the mere presence of the account itself in terms of influencing perceptions of fair treatment. Weiner et al. (1987) indicated that negative reactions were lessened when the excuse was “good” relative to “poor”. In addition, studies of “referent cognitions” have suggested that only explanations perceived to be adequate were effective at offsetting negative reactions to procedural changes resulting in poor outcomes (Folger & Martin, 1986; Folger, Rosenfield & Robinson, 1983). Conversely, there is evidence that when a message is poorly constructed (or weak), stronger counterarguments are generated by the listeners resulting in an even greater negative reaction; this has been called the “boomerang effect” (Greenwald, 1968; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981a). The evidence is clear that accounts are useful for ameliorating the undesirable reactions to negative events, but only when those harmed perceive the account to be adequate.
Even though it is a key variable, account adequacy has received surprisingly little attention (e.g., Shapiro, 1991; and Shapiro et al., 1994). In fact, it is not clear what it means for an account to be “adequate” nor is it clear how an agent should go about constructing an adequate account. In the literature, adequacy has simply been described as an intervening variable between an account and specific outcomes. For example, Bies and Shapiro (1987) suggested,

...the mere providing of a causal account claiming mitigating circumstances is not sufficient to enhance ratings of interactional fairness and support for the manager; rather such a causal account must be perceived as adequate in order to do so (p. 210).

There has been a tendency in the literature to assume that an adequate account is based on factors associated with the quality of the message. For example, adequacy has been measured as the “adequacy of the reasoning” (Bies et al., 1988), suggesting that the assessment of adequacy involves a cognitive evaluation of the account’s content. Therefore, a message imbued with “strong” qualities such as logic, clarity, or specific information, should be perceived as adequate. A singular focus on message content, however, will not always guarantee that a message will be acceptable.

Other characteristics external to the message itself may influence a person’s evaluation of an account. For example, it has long been known that the credibility of the source has a significant impact on opinion change, independent from the content of the message (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). In addition, research on social information processing
illustrates how social cues (e.g., the reactions of others) can impact a person’s attitudinal reactions (cf. Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978 for a discussion of “social information processing”). Considering such external influences, it becomes apparent that it is not just the evaluation of an account’s content that is important, but also the recipient’s reaction to the broader context of the account.

Therefore, “adequacy” may not be the best “term” for the variable thought to mediate the relationship between accounts and attitudes or perceptions of fairness. A better, more precise variable would simply be “acceptance” of the account. This term is more consistent with a persuasion approach in that it places the focus on the recipient’s attitudinal reaction to the account event, as opposed to some unspecified quality of the account’s content. Therefore, this study used the term “acceptance” with the understanding that it refers to the formation of a positive evaluation of the account, and that it subsumes the concept of “adequacy”.

The present study used a persuasion approach to the study of accounts. It is argued here that account “acceptance” is essentially an evaluative judgment consistent with Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) conceptualization; and the process of gaining acceptance is essentially an attempt to influence that judgment in a positive direction. Furthermore, factors associated with both the content of the account and the source should be important in the formation of belief structures that influence a recipient’s reaction to it.
A Persuasion Approach to Social Accounts.

Traditionally, there have been two general approaches to the study of persuasion and attitude change (see Chaiken & Stangor, 1987 for a review). The first approach considers how attitude change is affected through detailed cognitive processing of a persuasive communication. From this perspective, persuasion occurs after thoughtful consideration of the information in a message. If, after scrutinizing or analyzing the content of the message, the arguments are perceived as having merit, then supportive thoughts will be generated and a more favorable attitude will result. If the arguments are weak or specious, then counterarguments will be elicited leading to a more negative attitude. This approach has been referred to as cognitive responses (Greenwald, 1968; Petty, Ostrom & Brock, 1981), systematic processing (Chaiken, 1980), and central route processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981).

The second approach used in persuasion research has focused on the persuasive impact of factors unrelated to the quality of, or information contained in the message itself. From this perspective, persuasion can occur in the absence of cognitive message evaluation. Instead, recipients of a persuasive appeal may rely on extrinsic cues that enable the use of simple decision rules (such as “expert sources are more believable than non-expert sources”) to evaluate the validity of a message. Chaiken (1987) refers to this as heuristic processing. Petty & Cacioppo (1981a) proposed a more general framework than Chaiken (1987); they suggested persuasion can occur in response to any factors or situational cues (unrelated to the message) that elicit an affective response to the message.
This would include cues that elicit heuristic processing, or cues that trigger classically-conditioned affective responses (Chaiken & Stangor, 1987). When persuasion occurs in this fashion, it has occurred peripheral to the processing of message content, and is therefore referred to as the peripheral route to persuasion.

In sum, research indicates that persuasion can occur through the cognitive analysis of the information or issues within a message, or through one’s reaction to non-message cues that become associated with the appeal. In other words, current approaches to persuasion consider both the quality of the message and factors associated with the source to be important determinates of attitude change. In fact, these types of factors have received over 40 years of attention in attitude change research. One approach in particular has been most influential in guiding the current approaches to persuasion. It is referred to as the message learning approach (Hovland et al., 1953). This research has been primarily influential in terms of the factors considered important in attitude change. Since the accounts literature is just beginning to determine the types of factors that mediate account acceptance, the message learning approach can be useful in identifying relevant factors.

The message learning approach to attitude change, pioneered by Hovland and his colleagues (Hovland et al., 1953), emphasized how “new” opinions are learned through communications or messages. According to this approach, persuasion occurs through a sequential process. First, a message is attended to (i.e., heard) and comprehended. Second, it is analyzed by considering the credibility of the source, and/or the believability of the message (i.e., the message content, arguments and issues are rehearsed, and
compared to former beliefs and attitudes). Third, the message is learned or remembered. Fourth, the incentives or rewards for the new attitude are compared to the benefits of the prior attitude. If the incentives for the new attitude are greater or more beneficial to the individual, attitude change should result.

Several current persuasion theories are grounded in this approach, such as cognitive response theory (Greenwald, 1968; Sternthal, Dholakia, & Leavitt, 1978), and the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). This pioneering work of Hovland and associates, then, remains useful as a guide to the types of factors that might influence the acceptance of social accounts.

Within the “message learning” approach, there are many types of determinants that could potentially affect the perceived acceptance of an account. For example, four primary classes of factors that affect the ability of a message to persuade or change an attitude, have been researched: message factors (message content), source factors (communicator characteristics), recipient factors (audience predispositions), and the communication medium (channel factors) (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1981a for a review of this literature). Message factors refer to “what was said”, or factors associated with the content of the appeal. Source factors refer to “who said it”; these are factors associated with the credibility of the message provider, such as expertness, attractiveness and trustworthiness. Recipient factors refer to individual factors associated with the message receiver, such as the degree of motivation, or cognitive ability. Finally, channel factors
refer to the media used in delivering the message, such as TV, radio, magazines, memo, or personal presentation.

Although recipient and channel factors are relevant in the study of account acceptance, this study is limited to the consideration of source and message factors. These factors are currently receiving the most attention in the attitude change literature and are beginning to be examined in the accounts literature. The study of these factors should provide knowledge that is useful in the construction of effective verbal accounts within the context of leader-subordinate interactions.

The impact of message factors. Much of our knowledge regarding the impact of message factors is based on research following the message learning. According to this perspective, cogent factors inherent within a message that facilitate attending, comprehension, yielding, and learning will lead to greater attitude change. Factors that have received the most attention in this literature include the comprehensibility of the message, the number of arguments presented, and the presentation of both sides of an argument. In addition to these, the accounts literature has identified message specificity as one important message factor.

In general, if message recipients are unable to comprehend a message, then it has no chance of changing attitudes. Eagly (1974) and Ratneshwar and Chaiken (1991) have shown that to be the case. Their investigations demonstrated that the more comprehensible the message, the greater the recall of the arguments and the greater the acceptance of the message.
It has been shown, too, that the greater the number of arguments in a message, the
greater the persuasion (Calder, Insko, & Yandell, 1974; Chaiken, 1980; Eagly & Warren,
1976). Interestingly, multiple arguments can also have an impact on persuasion apart from
the actual information they convey; in this case the simple presence of additional
arguments simply serve as a heuristic or peripheral cue (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981a).

Other studies have examined message factors that enhance persuasion because they
discourage the production of counterargumentation. For example, when two sides of an
issue (as opposed to just the position advocated) are presented (both pro and con), to
recipients initially opposed to the position advocated, and the opposing side is
subsequently shown to be false, greater attitude change has been the result (Hovland,
Cognitive response theory suggests that this effect occurs because the opposing argument
serves as a counterargument for the recipient, which is then weakened by the refutation
(Petty & Cacioppo, 1981a). In other words, the “weakness” of the counterargument
enhances acceptance of the advocated message by making it appear stronger or more
truthful.

In sum, studies based on the message learning approach and cognitive responses
demonstrate that factors which facilitate comprehension and learning of a “strong”
message will lead to greater advocacy for the message. Therefore, the following
proposition is advanced,
Proposition 1: A social account containing message factors that enhance its perceived veracity, will have a positive impact on its acceptability.

Within the accounts domain, there is some support for a positive relationship between certain message factors and perceived account adequacy. Two particular studies have focused on variables associated with the logic of the explanation. For example, Shapiro and Buttner (1988) indicated that explanations for rejecting loans were perceived to be more adequate and procedurally fair when based on relevant financial data (which was conceptualized as “logical”). In addition, Bies et al. (1988) indicated that the “adequacy of reasoning” was reported to be significantly related to a reduction in anger, perceived procedural injustice, and disapproval of the boss.

“Specificity of information” is another type of message factor that was examined in a field study surveying college students who had recently been rejected for a job position (Shapiro et al., 1994). Explanations that were perceived to provide a relatively high degree of explicit information (i.e., regarding the reason for job rejection) had a significant, positive impact on the perceived adequacy of the account. A follow-up experiment within the same study provided similar results (Shapiro et al., 1994 -- study 2). After reading various vignettes describing a professor’s explanation for failing a student, student participants rated the adequacy of the account. It was reported that explanations that provided specific information regarding the method used to calculate a failing grade were perceived to be more adequate than those with less explicit explanations.
This type of factor should also be important for a justification of changes made in a pay-for-performance situation (the context of this study). For example, consider a training situation where a distributive criterion (i.e., criterion for rewarding performance) is established prior to work on a task, but subsequently changed following completion of the work. By changing the criterion after completion of the work, the trainer’s actions directly impact the outcomes of all the trainees, which should make his/her decision salient and suspect. If the trainees believe the action threatens to produce negative personal outcomes, they will most likely want to know the reasons why the change was implemented. This situation places the trainer in the predicament of justifying the change in the distributive criterion, so that it will be accepted. To be effective, the justification should retain elements that are associated with improving a message’s acceptability. For example, the account recipients will likely prefer a justification with specific reasons (as opposed to vague or less specific reasons) for the change (e.g., Shapiro et al., 1994), and acceptance should increase. Therefore, it was hypothesized,

Hypothesis 1: A justification emphasizing specific information for a change in a distributive criterion will be more acceptable to trainees than a justification with less specific (vague) information.

The impact of source factors. Source factors refer to attributes of the communicator that affect attitude change independent of message factors. There are several such factors that have been associated with attitude change. For example, studies have demonstrated that attractiveness (Bersheid & Walster, 1974; Chaiken, 1979; Kahle &
Homer, 1985; McGuire, 1985), and similarity (Brock, 1965; Goethals, & Nelson, 1973) lead to greater attitude change. However, most studies that have considered the source of a message as a potential contributor to persuasion have examined factors associated with the account provider’s believability or credibility.

It has been assumed that the source’s credibility functions as a heuristic cue, such that credible sources are more knowledgeable and/or trustworthy, and are therefore more believable (Chaiken, 1987; O’Keefe, 1990). Furthermore, from a message learning approach, people are motivated to hold correct attitudes because there are greater rewards associated with them (Hovland et al., 1953). Therefore, it follows that a high credibility source will be more persuasive than a source with low credibility because of the greater probability of being correct. In general, there is substantial experimental research suggesting that highly credible sources lead to greater positive attitude change than less credible sources (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Kelman & Hovland, 1953; Johnson, Torcivia, & Poprick, 1968; Schulman & Worrall, 1970; Whittaker & Meade, 1968).

There are several specific situations in which a highly credible source is more effective than a low credibility source. For example, it has been reported that high speaker credibility leads to relatively greater attitude change as the message becomes more discrepant from the position advocated by the recipient, and that there is no main effect of credibility at low levels of discrepancy (Bochner & Insko, 1966). Note that the discrepancy variable is relevant for organizational justice situations where an account is delivered to manage negative reactions associated with unfavorable events or decisions.
In these situations, it is expected that the recipient’s initial attitude towards the account will be negative (hence, discrepant). Therefore, high source credibility should also be important in the delivery of an account.

High source credibility also leads to greater attitude change (relative to low credibility sources) when the speaker presents messages that are congruent with his/her own best interests (Walster, Aronson, & Abrahams, 1966). However, this latter affect is attenuated if the speaker presents arguments incongruent with his/her best interests. In those situations, low credibility sources become more influential when arguing against their best interests.

The latter finding illustrates that the impact of credibility is rather complex. In fact, there are several contextual variables that interact with communicator credibility to affect persuasion (see Sternthal, Phillips & Dholakia, 1978; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986 for reviews of these factors). Although, there are many situations in which credibility positively enhances persuasion as expected, there are some additional situations where less credibility leads to greater persuasion. For example, several studies have reported a greater persuasive impact from low credibility communicators when the message is proattitudinal (Bock & Saine, 1975; Chebat, Filiatrault, Larouche, & Watson, 1988; Harmon & Coney, 1982; Sternthal, Dholakia, & Leavitt, 1978).

In sum, high credibility appears to generally enhance the acceptance of a persuasive message, especially if the message is discrepant from the recipient’s initial attitude and is congruent with the best interests of the messenger. In contrast, a low
credibility communicator may be more effective in situations where the message is proattitudinal.

Studies of attitude change and persuasion have tended to operationalize source credibility in terms of expertise and/or trustworthiness. Expertise is defined as the perceived ability of the source to make correct assertions. Trustworthiness refers to the perception that the stated assertions are considered valid by the source (Hovland et al., 1953). It has been demonstrated that both expertise and trustworthiness are determinates of source credibility (Berlo, Lemert & Mertz, 1969; McCroskey, 1966).

Within the accounts literature, source credibility has not been manipulated directly. However, a source factor that should be related to credibility has been examined. For example, Bies et al. (1988) reported that the perceived sincerity of the boss (in addition to the adequacy of reasoning) affected ratings of procedural justice, anger, disapproval of the boss and complaints. Furthermore, recent studies demonstrated that this effect was mediated by the adequacy of the explanation (Shapiro, 1991; Shapiro et al., 1994). Within the context of the present study, it is reasonable to propose that a highly credible leader’s account will be considered more acceptable than a leader perceived to be less credible. Therefore, it was proposed,

Proposition 2: An account provided by a leader with high perceived credibility will have a positive impact on it’s acceptability.

The literature review pertaining to source credibility established that a highly credible source is more effective in changing a discrepant (negative) attitude to one that is
more positive. Most of these studies were conducted using student subjects within the context of some school-oriented issue (e.g., the implementation of comprehensive, senior exams), or within a marketing context (e.g., persuasion with regard to various product advertisements). By way of extension, it is reasonable to expect source credibility to be important within a training context; a more credible trainer should generally be more effective than one that lacks credibility. This should also pertain to situations where the trainer must justify decisions that have undesirable consequences for the trainees. More specifically, a trainer with little credibility should certainly have more trouble justifying a change in distributive criteria than a highly credible trainer, especially when trainee outcomes are reduced.

One determinate of credibility that has not been examined within the accounts literature is “expertise”. Expertise is especially pertinent within a training context — trainees expect their trainer to be knowledgeable. Moreover, the expertise of the trainer should be particularly relevant when decisions have an adverse impact on participants’ outcomes. Under those circumstances, the participants should find an expert trainer’s explanation for a decision more believable than one made by a non-expert. More specifically, an expert trainer’s justification for a change in a distributive criterion that results in reduced trainee outcomes should be perceived as more acceptable than one provided by a novice trainer.
Hypothesis 2: A justification for a change in a distributive criterion presented by a trainer with high expertise will be more acceptable to trainees than a justification presented by a trainer with low expertise.

The relative impact of message vs. source factors. The second issue of importance to this study concerns the condition(s) under which various factors are most effective at gaining acceptance of an account. No specific theory has been advanced within the accounts literature that would predict the conditions under which various factors have greatest import for achieving acceptance. The elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), however, may be appropriate in an account context. It suggests that the level of involvement interacts with message and source factors such that message quality is more important under conditions of high involvement, and source factors are more important under conditions of low involvement. These relationships are depicted in Figure 1 (in Chapter 1).

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) is a model of attitude change that integrates the two traditional approaches to persuasion. The model makes three primary assumptions. First, people process information in two basic ways: they either listen to, analyze, elaborate and evaluate the issues within a message, or they lend less cognitive attention to the message, and instead, judge its merits based on affective cues in the environment associated with the object. Second, cognitive elaboration of a message requires effort. Third, because cognitive elaboration requires effort, one’s level of
motivation and ability to attend to the message will determine the predominant channel through which the message is processed.

Petty and Cacioppo refer to the first method of processing communicated information as the “central” route (or channel) to persuasion. When the recipients’ of a persuasive appeal are able and motivated to attend to an argument, they will be “likely to elaborate” the message by scrutinizing it, comparing it to, or integrating it with previously held knowledge and beliefs about the topic. In the process of integrating and elaborating the new information, new arguments towards the attitude object are constructed. If these arguments are predominantly favorable, then positive attitude change occurs. If these new thoughts are predominantly unfavorable, then negative attitude change occurs. As should be apparent, the quality or strength of the persuasive appeal is critical to affecting attitude change through this central route.

Sometimes the recipients of a persuasive message have a prior familiarity with the attitude object and have already formed their opinions. When persuasive messages are delivered to people with previously formed attitudes, some surprising results can occur. For example, when a message is counterattitudinal, the recipients form counterarguments to it (Folger, 1993, refers to counterarguments as “counterfactuals”). If the message is “weak”, it will be overwhelmed by the counterarguments and the persuasive attempt will result in a “boomerang effect” — the counter attitude will be strengthened. However, if the message contains “strong” arguments, then the favorable thoughts elicited by the
message will dominate the negative thoughts held prior to the message and the persuasion attempt will likely be successful.

This central route obviously requires cognitive effort and is most likely to be used when an issue is highly involving or has high personal relevance for the person (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). Petty and Cacioppo define personal relevance as the extent to which an advocacy has intrinsic importance or personal meaning for the recipient. A message under these conditions should motivate the message recipient to exert greater cognitive effort to process the issue-relevant arguments. In fact, Petty and Cacioppo (1979) reported that when the argument was strong, greater personal relevance led to greater acceptance of the message; but when the argument was weak, greater relevance led to greater rejection of the message. The important point here is that the quality of the message becomes more important under conditions of higher involvement.

It is not surprising, however, that people sometimes are unmotivated or unable to process all messages according to the central route. We often lack the desire or cognitive resources to “elaborate” every message. Even under these conditions, an appeal can still change attitudes through the “peripheral route”. This route pertains to the processing of contextual and social-psychological cues surrounding a message, such as those associated with the source. For example, if a message is associated with any positive affective cues, such as the expertise or perceived sincerity of the message sender, the presentation of the message may still lead to positive attitude change without extensive processing of the message-relevant content. This type of processing may utilize any of a number of different
processes, such as simple heuristic reasoning (e.g., Chaiken, 1980; 1987), attributional analysis (Eagly, Chaiken & Wood, 1981) or impression management (Schlenker, 1980). As described by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), any message processing that takes place without active thinking about the issues or content, is considered peripheral processing (see Chaiken & Stangor, 1987, for a more detailed description of the “peripheral processing” family of theories). The peripheral route is most likely to be used when the message recipient is unable to comprehend the message (i.e., it may be too complex / technical; or they are distracted), or when unmotivated (i.e., uninvolved in the message).

It is important to note that the distinction between central and peripheral processing does not connote two mutually exclusive, independent types of processing. But rather, they describe the predominate types of cognitive processing at two extremes of an elaboration likelihood continuum (see O’Keefe, 1990 for a discussion of this point). When ability and/or motivation to process a message are at intermediate levels, then cognitive processing likely involves both central and peripheral processing.

To test this model of persuasion, investigations typically employ experimental designs. For example, a complete test of the model ordinarily uses a 2x2x2 factorial design manipulating high and low levels of message strength, a source factor, and involvement. To illustrate, Petty, Cacioppo and Goldman (1981) presented undergraduate students with a taped broadcast of an argument in favor of the installment of comprehensive senior exams. The strength of the message was varied so that the strong version used statistics and data to support the position, whereas the weak version relied
more on personal opinion and quotations. For the source factor, high and low levels of expertise were manipulated. In the high expertise condition, subjects were told that the argument was based on a report prepared by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education chaired by a professor of education at Princeton University. Subjects in the low expertise condition were told the report was prepared by a local high school class. Involvement was manipulated by indicating that the advocated exams would take place at the university either the following year, which would affect the participating students (high involvement), or in ten years, which would have no effect on the students (low involvement). As hypothesized, the strength of the message had a positive effect on persuasion when involvement was high, but not when it was low. In contrast, source expertise had a positive impact on persuasion when involvement was low, but not when it was high.

There is a great deal of support for this model. Generally speaking, studies reporting that message strength becomes a relatively more important determinate of persuasion as personal relevance (or involvement) increases, provide support for central processing. Several studies have found this effect (e.g., Chaiken, 1980; Leippe & Elkin, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979, 1981b, 1984; Petty, Cacioppo & Goldman, 1981; and Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann, 1983). In contrast, support for peripheral processing is obtained when factors extrinsic to the message are found to be relatively stronger determinates of persuasion as involvement or ability to process a message decreases. Several studies have reported that as involvement in an issue decreases, credibility or

Similar effects have been reported for the likability (Chaiken, 1980 — experiment 1; Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann, 1983), physical attractiveness of the communicator (Wilson & Donnerstein, 1977 — experiment 1), and audience reaction expressing approval or disapproval of the argument (Axsom, Yates & Chaiken, 1987).

In sum, when message recipients are motivated (involved) and able to process a message, persuasion will be determined primarily by the strength of the message content. But when message recipients are less motivated, or unable to process the message, they will be more persuaded by peripheral cues that are unrelated to the quality of the message.

Since the use of accounts entails essentially an active attempt to persuade or manipulate attitudes about fairness, message and source factors should affect the acceptability of an account in the manner predicted by the ELM. In other words, when outcomes are considered highly involving, the perceived acceptability of an account will be determined to the greatest extent through the central route, and message factors will have a relatively greater impact on the perceived acceptability than source factors.

Therefore, the following proposition is advanced,

**Proposition 3:** When the outcomes are perceived to be highly involving, message factors will determine the acceptability of an account to a greater extent than source factors.
Conversely, if the outcomes are perceived to be unimportant or uninvolving, then the peripheral route will most likely be followed, and source factors will have greater impact on the perceived adequacy of the account. Therefore, it was proposed,

**Proposition 4:** When the outcomes are perceived to be less involving, source factors will determine the acceptability of an account to a greater extent than message factors.

Taken together, propositions 3 and 4 suggest that source and message factors interact with the importance of the outcome to determine the adequacy or acceptability of accounts.

There are some issues regarding the ELM that need to be addressed. First, since central processing involves message analysis, message factors are typically identified with the central route. However, some message factors can act as peripheral cues. For example, the number of arguments used in a message is often thought to enhance persuasion by eliciting more favorable thoughts towards the message, which is characteristic of central route processing (Chaiken, 1980). However, in one study that manipulated both argument number and argument quality it was reported that the number of arguments was more important under low than high involvement conditions (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Furthermore, the quality of the arguments was more important in predicting persuasion in the high than low involvement condition. Although not traditionally considered a “source cue”, the number of arguments in this case functioned as a peripheral factor.
According to Petty and Cacioppo (1984), these results illustrate how a message recipient can form a positive evaluation of an argument based simply on the number of arguments without really processing the message. It is therefore important to keep in mind that not all message factors, per se, are synonymous with central processing. Rather, factors associated with the quality of the message content are more likely to be important (than extrinsic cues) when motivated to centrally process the message.

In relation to the above issue, there is a general problem with the way argument quality has been operationalized in these studies. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) defined a strong message as one that leads to predominantly favorable thoughts and a weak message as one that leads to predominantly unfavorable thoughts. In their interest to develop “strong” and “weak” arguments, they developed multiple arguments each containing several message features, and tested them to determine the degree to which they elicited favorable or unfavorable thoughts. For each experiment they would choose one “strong” argument and one “weak” argument (eliciting favorable and unfavorable thoughts respectively) that were equated on factors irrelevant to their strength, such as the overall believability or comprehensibility. By operationalizing message quality in this tautological fashion, it is impossible to ascertain exactly what feature of each argument is responsible for the effect. As a result, the argument quality measure has been confounded (O’Keefe, 1990). For that reason, it is important that future research address this problem by developing measures that manipulate a single message factor, as opposed to multiple factors.
One more important issue that needs to be addressed concerns the theoretical specification of involvement. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) specify a general view of involvement such that as an issue becomes more personally relevant or important, the recipient will be more involved and more likely to “elaborate” the message. This has been typically operationalized by presenting an issue that will or will not have a direct impact on the message recipients. Several critics have noted that this view of involvement is simplistic; and that involvement is more than likely multifaceted (cf., Chaiken & Stangor, 1987; Johnson & Eagly, 1990; O’Keefe, 1990). Johnson and Eagly (1990), argued that “outcome-relevant” involvement was responsible for the effects reported in typical ELM studies conducted by Petty and his colleagues. This form of involvement occurs when the issue in the message is linked to important participant outcomes or goals. Furthermore, they reported that attitude change is less likely with other conceptualizations of involvement. Therefore, the predicted effects of an ELM study depend on a careful manipulation of “outcome” involvement.

Another issue related to the operationalization of involvement concerns the over-reliance on one particular topic. There has been an overwhelming tendency to use the topic of “senior comprehensive exams” or tuition changes. In the high involvement conditions, subjects were led to believe that an advocated senior comprehensive exam or a tuition change would be implemented at their university soon enough to affect them; or in the low involvement condition, subjects were led to believe that the change would be implemented far in the future or at some other university. O’Keefe (1990) noted that
there was roughly twice as many of these studies reported in Petty and Cacioppo (1986) than any other topic. Clearly there is a need to test this theory using different contexts and attitudinal objects to demonstrate the generalizability of the theory.

The ELM has not been explicitly considered within the social accounts or organizational justice literature. However, a few investigations have employed variables associated with accounts that can be examined from an ELM perspective. For example, in a field study, Brockner et al. (1990) reported survey findings from recent job layoff survivors that are consistent with the ELM. They found that the clarity of justifications was more effective at eliciting favorable reactions when the survivors attached greater importance to the layoff (in terms of the future probability of additional layoffs and their attachment to the layoff victims).

In two studies (studies two and three), Shapiro et al. (1994) examined the relative importance of an explanation’s specificity (a message quality factor) versus the sincerity of the messenger (source cue) under varying levels of outcome severity (a potential motivating factor that may be related to personal involvement). In study two, senior college students entering the job market were asked to recall a job rejection from a firm for whom they had a strong desire to work, and the explanation provided. In study three, subjects were asked to read vignettes describing various explanations a student received in writing from a professor regarding a failing grade. The subjects were asked to pretend to be that student.
It was reported in both studies that the specificity of the explanation consistently had a greater impact on the perceived adequacy than the degree of sincerity expressed by the account provider. In study three, a three way interaction (i.e., specificity x sincerity x severity) suggested that the sincerity of the account provider increased perceptions of account adequacy under conditions of low severity (or high severity when the specificity of the message was low), but was less effective under conditions of high severity when the explanation was specific. These results are consistent with the ELM. Specificity, however, appeared to have a positive impact on adequacy evaluations regardless of the level of severity conditions (the interpretation of this interaction is presented tentatively because the authors did not perform any simple main effects analyses). This is somewhat contrary to the ELM, which predicts a decline of the impact of specificity under low severity.

There are at least two explanations for the finding that explanation specificity was most important regardless of outcome severity. First, it doesn’t appear that there was an equivalent test for the specificity and sincerity variables in either study. For example, in study two participants were asked to recall job rejection letters from firms. Recall of critical events is problematic for many reasons. For example, there is evidence that the effects of source cues decay over time. More specifically, the impact of high and low credibility sources on attitudes tends to moderate as time passes (see Sternthal, Phillips & Dholakia, 1978 for a discussion of the “sleeper effect”). As a result, this study may have failed to provide an equal test for both message and source factors.
The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) offers an alternative explanation to the one discussed above. It suggests that when the level of recipient involvement in the message is high, message quality will be more important. When the message has little or no relevance to the recipient, source characteristics or social cues will have a greater impact on attitude change than the quality of the message. Despite the severity measures used in the two studies of interest, “personal relevance” or outcome involvement was manipulated to be high (i.e., job rejection from a firm for whom the candidate “had a strong desire to work”, and an explanation for the recipient’s failing grade). Accordingly, message factors should and did have a greater impact on the acceptability of the account.

This finding also raises an important theoretical issue. It is presently unknown how justice situations posed in the study of accounts fit with the elaboration likelihood model. The key to this fit more than likely resides in how concerns about justice are related to “involvement”. Early approaches to the study of organizational justice proceeded from the assumption that justice issues become salient when outcomes become inequitable. This assumption is consistent with equity theory (Adams, 1965) and relative deprivation theory (e.g., Crosby, 1984). So, from this perspective, if outcomes are unaffected by a “questionnable” change in a distribution rule, then there should be minimal concern about the fairness of the change. Moreover, it suggests that the level of involvement is determined by the manipulation of outcomes. If this perspective is accurate, then the ELM should fit well in a justice context.
Previously, it was suggested that when distributive criteria are changed in a way
that threatens a subordinate’s personal outcomes, they will react negatively and fairness
will be a primary concern. This should also hold within a training context. Trainees
whose outcomes are affected the most (e.g., significant loss of pay) will be more involved
and more motivated to scrutinize the justification to ascertain whether or not it is
acceptable. The ELM states that under this condition, a strong argument will be more
persuasive than one that is weak. For this study, it is asserted that a strong argument is
one that provides specific information in a justification for a change in the distributive
criterion. The greater the specificity, the more likely the recipients will find the
justification to be acceptable. Trainees whose outcomes are less severely affected (e.g.,
no loss in pay), however, will be less involved and less likely to analyze the justification to
the same extent. According to the ELM, they may be more likely to consider peripheral
cues such as the expertise of the trainer to determine how they should react to the
justification. Moreover, if their level of involvement with the distributive change is low
enough, trainee reactions will likely be determined more by the expertise of the trainer and
less by the justification’s specificity. The level of involvement will thus act as a
moderating factor. Therefore, based on this theory, the following hypotheses were tested:

Hypothesis 3: When the outcomes are highly involving, the specificity of
a justification for a change in a distributive criterion will have a greater
positive impact on the acceptability of the justification, relative to source
expertise.
Hypothesis 4: When outcomes are less involving, source expertise will have a greater positive impact on the acceptability of the justification for a change in a distributive criterion, relative to the specificity of the justification.

The role played by account acceptability on other outcomes. The primary focus of this study was to examine the impact of message specificity and source expertise on account acceptance. Its theoretical and practical significance, though, are based on an acceptable account’s ability to affect perceptions of justice, attitudes, and behavior. Therefore, there should be direct effects of an account's acceptability on these types of outcomes. As discussed above, there is substantial evidence that accounts have such effects. Establishing a direct link between account acceptability and such outcomes, however, only provides part of the picture. It has been assumed in the accounts literature that the acceptability (adequacy) of a social account mediates the relationship between the delivery of it and outcome variables. This study sought to demonstrate both the direct and mediating effects of justification acceptability.

The direct effects. The use of accounts have been found to increase perceptions of organizational justice. In particular, accounts perceived to be adequate have been found effective at increasing perceptions of procedural justice (Bies & Shapiro, 1987; 1988; Bies et al., 1988), and interactional justice (Bies & Moag, 1986; Bies & Shapiro, 1987). Therefore, it was proposed that,
Proposition 5: The acceptability of an account will be positively related to perceptions of organizational justice.

When a decision to change a distributive criteria in a pay-for-performance situation is made, several “justice” issues are raised especially if negative outcomes follow the decision. Subordinates will become concerned with the fairness involved in the decision-making process. The manner in which the change is communicated to the subordinates should have an impact on subordinate perceptions of their “treatment” by the leader. Since the decision likely means that rewards will be allocated differently than before, subordinates will also be concerned with the fairness of the distributive decision.

An acceptable justification should be able to improve these perceptions of fairness. In fact, previous studies have shown that an adequate account is associated with greater perceptions of procedural fairness (Bies & Shapiro, 1987; 1988; Bies et al., 1988), and interactional fairness (Bies & Moag, 1986; Bies & Shapiro, 1987). These findings should also hold true within a training context where performance is evaluated. If a carefully constructed justification by a trainer for a distributive change is found to be acceptable, then any concerns the trainees had about the fairness of the evaluation process should be ameliorated. In other words, procedural fairness should be improved. If the trainer fails to provide an acceptable justification, then trainees may feel mistreated by the trainer. But, if the trainer takes the time to provide an acceptable justification, it may be construed as “respect” or “value” for the concerns of the trainees, and perceptions of interactional fairness are likely to be enhanced (Tyler & Lind, 1992). An acceptable justification
should also improve perceptions of distributive fairness in this situation, since it addresses
the basis behind the change in the distributive decision. Therefore, the following
hypotheses were tested:

Hypothesis 5a: The acceptability of a justification will have a positive
relationship with perceptions of procedural fairness.

Hypothesis 5b: The acceptability of a justification will have a positive
relationship with perceptions of interactional fairness.

Hypothesis 5c: The acceptability of a justification will have a positive
relationship with perceptions of distributive fairness.

There is also substantial evidence that quality messages affect attitudes. For
example, studies of the elaboration likelihood model, demonstrate that “strong” messages
have a greater impact on persuasion than weak messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).
These studies have focused exclusively on attitudes towards the object of the message.
Organizational justice research has demonstrated that an account can also impact attitudes
towards the message provider. For example, several studies have reported that an
acceptable or “good” account can reduce a recipient’s anger towards the harmdoer (Bies
& Shapiro, 1987; Folger et al., 1983; Weiner et al., 1987; & Weiner et al., 1991). If the
harmdoer happens to be a leader, then an effective account should also improve attitudes
towards that leadership. Furthermore, it is reasonable to suggest that any strong or
persistent negative feelings attributable to “the harmdoer” may generalize to other aspects
of the employee’s work experience through classical conditioning (i.e., he/she may
associate the negative affect towards the harmdoer with the job itself), which also can be ameliorated by an effective account.

Proposition 6: The acceptability of an account will be positively related to recipient attitudes towards the leader and the task involved in the leader-subordinate relationship.

As discussed above, a training situation where a distributive criterion is changed after performance is completed will raise concern about the fairness of the act, especially if it reduces trainee outcomes. If this “normative violation” is not justified, then the trainees will likely become angry and dissatisfied. To the extent that they perceive the trainer as being responsible for the decision, they will likely be dissatisfied with him. But to the extent that an acceptable justification is provided by the trainer, satisfaction with the trainer should be enhanced.

It is also reasonable to expect such an action to affect the trainees’ attitude towards the task. To the extent that the trainer’s post hoc change in the distributive decision reduces outcomes for the trainees, then few if any rewards will be associated with the task itself and they will likely experience dissatisfaction with it. But if an acceptable justification is given for the distributive change, then the negative affect associated with the task should be reduced. Therefore, the acceptability of the justification should be positively associated with the trainees’ satisfaction with the task. Based on the above discussion, the following two hypotheses were tested.
Hypothesis 6a: The acceptability of a justification will be positively related to perceptions of satisfaction with the trainer.

Hypothesis 6b: The acceptability of a justification will be positively related to perceptions of satisfaction with the task.

There is also some support that acceptable accounts affect behaviors. For example, Greenberg (1987) demonstrated that participants in an experiment who received unfair treatment and low outcomes, were significantly more likely to take a telephone number (posted by an office that investigates unethical experimentation) from a bulletin board, than participants who were treated fairly, and/or received higher outcomes. This measure was designed to assess the participants intention to complain about their treatment. In addition, accounts research has demonstrated that an adequate account leads to greater approval of the boss (Bies et al., 1988; Bies & Shapiro, 1987), and is negatively correlated with complaints to higher-ups (Bies et al., 1988). Therefore, it was proposed,

Proposition 7: The acceptability of an account will be related to subordinate behavioral reactions towards the leader and the task.

This proposition should also apply in a pay-for-performance, training situation. It is reasonable to expect a change in a distributive criterion that reduces trainee outcomes to also affect their behavior towards the trainer and the task itself. Changes implemented by the trainer that anger or upset the trainees may cause an increase in any number of behaviors such as negative comments or complaints about the decision. In addition, if
trainees are upset enough by the decision, they might become less committed to the trainer and more willing to transfer out of the training situation given the opportunity (Cobb & Frey, 1996). If subordinates think the action was justified, however, the impetus for their reactive behaviors would be removed or reduced. Therefore, an acceptable justification should ameliorate these types of behaviors. Based on that reasoning, it was hypothesized,

Hypothesis 7a: The acceptability of a justification will be positively related to commitment to the trainer.

Hypothesis 7b: The acceptability of a justification will be positively associated with trainee commitment to the task.

Hypothesis 7c: The acceptability of a justification will be inversely associated with subordinate complaints.

The mediating effects. It has generally been concluded in the social accounts literature that the use of explanations leads to more favorable perceptions of fairness, attitudes and behavior, if they are adequate. These effects have led to an assumption in the literature that account adequacy mediates the relationship between the delivery of an account and these outcomes. Only two studies have directly tested the mediating role of account adequacy (Bies & Shapiro, 1987 -- study 2; Shapiro, 1991). For example, Bies and Shapiro (1987 -- study 2) reported that the adequacy of a causal account mediated the relationship between its use (causal account vs. no causal account conditions) and measures of interactional fairness and approval of the boss (harmdoer). That study, however, revealed nothing about the determinates that make an account acceptable.
Presumably, any factors associated with the delivery of an account that lead to a favorable impression should be more acceptable, and should lead to better outcomes. Therefore, it was proposed,

**Proposition 8:** The acceptability of an account will mediate the relationship between favorable factors and perceptions of fairness, attitudes and behaviors.

It was expected that the above proposition could apply in a pay-for-performance context where a justification is delivered subsequent to a change in a distributive criterion. In this context, the change in the distributive criterion piques concern about the fairness of the situation, may lead to reduced levels of satisfaction, reduced commitment, and greater complaints. To the extent that a justification provides specific information about the need for the change, perceptions of fairness, satisfaction, and commitment should be enhanced; and complaint behavior reduced. Furthermore, these effects should be mediated by the acceptability of the justification.

This line of reasoning should also apply to the expertise of the agent (i.e., trainer) providing the justification. An expert should be perceived to be more knowledgeable and trustworthy, which ought to mitigate their concerns about the change in the distributive criterion. This is in turn should enhance perceptions of fairness, satisfaction, and commitment; and reduce complaint behavior.
Moreover, these effects should be mediated by the acceptability of the justification.

Therefore, it was hypothesized,

Hypothesis 8: The acceptability of a justification will mediate the relationship between the independent variables (justification specificity and expertise) and the dependent variables (perceptions of procedural, interactional and distributive fairness; satisfaction with the task and trainer; commitment to the task and trainer; and complaint behavior).