

**The Management of Justice through Accounts:  
Constructing Acceptable Justifications**

by  
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ABSTRACT

The most recent research trend within the field of organizational justice is the study of interactional justice (Tyler & Bies, 1990; Greenberg, 1990). Most of the work conducted in this area focuses on the explanations leaders give to followers about decisions made or actions taken that frequently lead to adverse consequences or loss. These explanations are called “social accounts”. While research indicates that social accounts are effective at mitigating negative reactions to adverse decisions, and improving perceptions of justice, the underlying causes remain largely unknown.

This study used the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as a theoretical base to explore what factors make an account “acceptable”, and the impact that an acceptable account has on a number of organizationally relevant outcomes. Specifically, this study used an experimental design in a pay-for-performance context to assess the impact of

message specificity (high vs. low) and source expertise (expert vs. non-expert), under varying conditions of outcome involvement (higher vs. lower) on the acceptability of a justification for a change in a distributive criterion that resulted in a loss. Other dependent variables investigated included perceptions of justice (procedural, interactional, and distributive fairness), attitudes (satisfaction with the trainer and the task), and behaviors (commitment to the trainer and the task, and complaints).

The results indicated that justifications delivered by the expert trainer were more acceptable than non-experts under conditions of lower involvement (except when a non-expert delivered a specific justification). This effect reversed itself, however, under higher involvement. There was a main effect of specificity such that specific justifications were more acceptable than vague justifications regardless of the level of involvement.

Acceptability was positively related to all dependent measures with the exception of complaints, which had a negative relationship. Furthermore, acceptability fully mediated the impact of message specificity on trainer commitment, and partially on procedural fairness, distributive fairness (assessment), and task commitment. Acceptability fully mediated the negative impact of expertise under high involvement on procedural and distributive fairness (assessment), and interactional fairness.

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