

Current Status and Prospects of Research on Justice Sensitivity

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Abstract

Justice sensitivity is a stable personality trait that characterizes individual differences in the ease of perceiving unjust events and the intensity of reactions to them. After nearly three decades of development, this research field has formed a mature four-dimensional structure model, including the dimensions of victim, observer, beneficiary, and perpetrator, which profoundly reveals differentiated psychological and behavioral responses due to different roles individuals play in unjust events. This report systematically reviews the conceptual evolution of justice sensitivity, the theoretical logic of the four-dimensional structure, and introduces internationally mainstream and locally adapted measurement tools. The core part of the report integrates empirical findings from two levels—individual psychology and behavior, and intergroup relations—and emphasizes the "self-oriented vs. other-oriented" dimensional differentiation effect that runs through them. Based on a systematic review of existing literature, it identifies limitations in current research, including coverage of research subjects, methodological paradigms, cultural adaptation, mechanism integration, and practical application, and provides prospects for future research directions, aiming to provide solid theoretical references and forward-looking guidance for deepening and innovating domestic research in this field.

Keywords

Justice sensitivity; four-dimensional structure; prosocial behavior; group attitudes; justice perception.

1. Introduction

Justice is a core value principle for the operation of human society and a central psychological issue in individual social adaptation. Early research on justice often focused on situational factors such as distributive justice and procedural justice, exploring how the external environment shapes individuals' justice perception and behavioral responses. With the integration of a personality psychology perspective, researchers gradually realized that when facing the same unjust event, different individuals exhibit significant and stable differences in perception threshold, emotional experience intensity, and behavioral tendencies, which cannot be fully explained by situational variables. In 1995, German scholar Schmitt formally proposed the concept of justice sensitivity to describe individual differences in justice perception and response.

After nearly three decades of development and refinement, justice sensitivity has formed a mature four-dimensional perspective model, with research scenarios gradually expanding from basic economic interactions to intimate relationships, organizational management, intergroup relations, social policies, and other fields, becoming a core personality variable for explaining

justice-related behaviors. Domestic scholars have gradually introduced this concept since the 2010s, completing the localized revision of measurement tools and preliminary empirical explorations[1], but overall, the research remains in a follow-up stage, with limitations such as concentrated research scenarios, insufficient exploration of underlying mechanisms, and a need for deeper cultural adaptation. Based on this, this paper systematically reviews the conceptual evolution, measurement tool system, and core research findings of justice sensitivity, summarizes the limitations of existing research, and proposes future research directions, aiming to provide a systematic theoretical reference for subsequent research in this field in China.

2. Conceptual Connotation and Structural Evolution of Justice Sensitivity

2.1. Core Definition of the Concept

In 1995, Schmitt first used the term "justice sensitivity" but did not provide a clear conceptual definition. It was not until 2010 that Schmitt, Baumert, Gollwitzer, and Maes formed a systematic expression: there are stable individual differences in the degree of sensitivity to justice, the ease of perceiving unjust events, and the intensity of reactions to perceived injustice[2]. This definition clarifies that the essence of justice sensitivity is an individual difference variable, with its core connotation comprising two levels: first, the cognitive threshold for perceiving injustice, i.e., whether an individual can quickly and keenly identify injustice in a situation; second, the emotional and behavioral intensity of the reaction, i.e., the degree of emotional fluctuation and behavioral tendency after perceiving injustice.

Subsequent research confirmed that justice sensitivity has cross-time stability and cross-situational consistency, belonging to the category of stable personality traits rather than temporary situational states. It is not simply a "concern for justice" but a comprehensive personality disposition integrating cognitive perception, emotional experience, and behavioral tendencies.

2.2. Structural Evolution: From a Three-Dimensional Model to a Four-Dimensional Model

The structure of justice sensitivity has always revolved around the "role and gain-loss status of the individual in unjust events," undergoing two key iterations.

In 2005, Schmitt et al. first proposed a three-dimensional model based on degree of involvement and gain-loss status: victim sensitivity (reaction when one's own interests are harmed), observer sensitivity (reaction when witnessing as a neutral third party), and perpetrator sensitivity (reaction when benefiting from injustice)[3]. However, this structure had obvious defects: it did not distinguish between "passive benefit" and "actively creating injustice for benefit," the conceptual boundary of perpetrator sensitivity was blurred, and its predictive power was limited.

In 2010, Schmitt et al. revised the structure, splitting the original perpetrator sensitivity into two independent dimensions, forming the widely recognized four-dimensional model that fully covers four typical roles in unjust events: (1) Victim sensitivity: self-oriented, focusing on reactions as the party harmed by injustice, with core motivation being self-interest protection; (2) Observer sensitivity: other-oriented, focusing on reactions as a third party witnessing others facing injustice, with core emotion being moral outrage; (3) Beneficiary sensitivity: other-oriented, focusing on reactions when passively benefiting from injustice, with core emotion being guilt after passive benefit; (4) Perpetrator sensitivity: other-oriented, focusing on reactions when actively committing injustice and benefiting from it, with core emotion being moral self-blame after active wrongdoing^[4].

The four-dimensional structure clearly distinguishes the "self-other" orientation and "active-passive" behavioral attributes, significantly enhancing the concept's explanatory and predictive power, making it the foundational framework for subsequent empirical research.

3. Measurement Tools for Justice Sensitivity and Localized Adaptations

With the refinement of the conceptual structure, a comprehensive measurement system covering all age groups has been developed for justice sensitivity, and domestic scholars have completed the localized revision of major scales.

3.1. Adult Justice Sensitivity Scale

In 1995, Schmitt et al. developed the first Justice Sensitivity Inventory (JSI), containing 18 unjust scenarios and 4 indicators, totaling 64 items, using a six-point scale, but all scenarios were from the victim's perspective, limiting its applicability. In 2010, following the four-dimensional structure, a comprehensive revision formed the complete version of the scale, with 40 items, 10 items per dimension, a six-point scale, and reliability coefficients above 0.94 for each subscale, making it the internationally mainstream adult measurement tool[2].

Domestically, Yang Ruijuan first completed a systematic translation and localized revision in 2013, verifying the applicability of the four-dimensional structure among university students, with Cronbach's α coefficients for the four dimensions ranging from 0.78 to 0.89, meeting psychometric standards[4]. Tan Xinyu's 2023 study further verified that the α coefficients for the victim and perpetrator dimensions were 0.88 and 0.94, respectively, confirming the stable applicability of the scale in Chinese adult samples[5].

3.2. Justice Sensitivity Scale for Children and Adolescents

Because the adult scale is not suitable for the cognitive level of minors, Bondü and Elsner developed the Justice Sensitivity Inventory for Children and Adolescents (JSI-CA5) in 2015, containing 20 items with a six-point scoring system, retaining the four-dimensional structure, and specifically adapted for minor groups[6].

Domestically, Zhang Yiping completed the Chinese translation and reliability and validity testing in 2023, with a total scale Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.94. It is currently the mainstream research tool for domestic primary and secondary school student groups and a common measurement basis for studies targeting junior high school samples[7].

Overall, the current measurement system covers all age groups and has undergone preliminary localized validation, but limitations remain, such as inadequate adaptation for special groups and difficulties in controlling self-report biases.

4. Core Research Progress on Justice Sensitivity

Existing research has revealed the effects of justice sensitivity at both individual and group levels, and it is generally confirmed that different dimensions exhibit distinct differentiation characteristics: victim sensitivity is self-oriented, mostly associated with negative outcomes; observer, beneficiary, and perpetrator sensitivities are other-oriented, generally having positive prosocial effects.

4.1. Individual Level: Antecedent Characteristics and Dimensional Differentiation Effects

4.1.1. Trait Attributes and Influencing Factors

As a stable personality trait, justice sensitivity has consistency across time and types of injustice, with each dimension showing both positive correlations and independent predictive power. This personality attribute has been validated in both Chinese and Western samples.

Regarding influencing factors, existing research primarily focuses on demographic and personality variables. At the demographic level, individuals from rural backgrounds, lower-grade students, and those with higher education levels tend to have relatively higher levels of justice sensitivity[8,9];gender differences show research inconsistencies: some studies found that female students' victim sensitivity is significantly higher than males', related to women's more delicate emotional perception and greater concern for interpersonal fairness[8];other studies found that males score higher on other-oriented dimensions, related to the social role expectation of "upholding rules"[10];still other studies found no significant gender differences, possibly due to moderation by sample age and measurement dimensions. At the personality level, justice sensitivity is significantly correlated with agreeableness and neuroticism from the Big Five personality traits, with neuroticism positively predicting victim sensitivity and agreeableness positively predicting other-oriented sensitivity[1].Additionally, parenting styles and early experiences of injustice can shape the formation of justice sensitivity, but relevant longitudinal evidence remains scarce.

4.1.2. Differentiation of Behavioral Effects Across Scenarios

In economic interaction scenarios, dimensional differentiation characteristics are most pronounced. Victim sensitivity negatively predicts cooperative behavior. The Sensitivity to Malevolent Intentions (SeMI) model indicates that individuals high in victim sensitivity are overly vigilant to exploitation cues, and in socially uncertain situations, they reduce cooperation due to fear of being exploited, even violating norms for self-protection[12].Anonymous game studies consistently find that individuals high in victim sensitivity show more self-interested distribution in dictator games and lower contributions in public goods games, with this conclusion validated across Western, East Asian, and Southeast Asian samples, showing strong cross-cultural consistency[13].In contrast, the three other-oriented dimensions positively predict fair behavior: individuals high in observer sensitivity are willing to incur costs to implement third-party punishment or compensate victims, with the core mediator being anger[14];individuals high in beneficiary and perpetrator sensitivity, driven by guilt, tend toward equal distribution and are more likely to adhere to fairness principles even when facing self-interested temptations. Domestic research by Zheng(2020) also confirmed this differentiation pattern[16].

In intimate relationship and work scenarios, this differentiation pattern remains stable. Victim sensitivity is a risk factor for relationship and occupational adaptation: individuals high in victim sensitivity exhibit a "distrust bias" toward partner reconciliation, with low willingness to forgive and strong revenge intentions, in which rumination plays a key mediating role[17];in the workplace, when perceiving distributive injustice, they are prone to decreased self-esteem and counterproductive work behaviors[9,18].Other-oriented dimensions act as protective factors: individuals high in observer sensitivity are more likely to empathize with others' contributions and promote fair resource distribution; individuals high in perpetrator sensitivity proactively compensate for their own unjust behaviors to maintain relationship and organizational fairness[10].

At the level of emotions and problem behaviors, victim sensitivity is a stable risk factor. Individuals with high victim sensitivity have a lower threshold for unjust cues and tend to interpret neutral events as malevolent targeting, triggering negative emotions such as anger, envy, and depression. Mediation analysis showed that victim sensitivity indirectly reduces individuals' life satisfaction through the chain mediation of "upward social comparison → envy"[19]; surveys of college students indicated that under social exclusion situations, individuals with high victim sensitivity are more prone to depressive emotions due to the cognition of "being treated unfairly"[20].Emotions further transform into behavioral problems: research on high school students confirmed that anger fully mediates the relationship between victim sensitivity and aggressive behavior [8]; longitudinal studies on elementary school

students also found that children with high victim sensitivity are more likely to engage in retaliatory aggression[7]; further surveys of middle school students showed that the correlation between victim sensitivity and reactive aggression is significantly stronger than that with proactive aggression[21]. In contrast, beneficiary and perpetrator sensitivities are negatively correlated with moral disengagement and bullying behaviors, serving as important protective factors[22,23].

4.1.3. Integration of Underlying Mechanisms

Overall, the effects of justice sensitivity follow a unified logic of "cognitive appraisal-emotional arousal-behavioral output": victim sensitivity, by lowering the threshold for perceiving injustice and generating hostile attribution bias, arouses negative self-directed emotions such as anger and envy, ultimately leading to self-protective antisocial behaviors; the three other-oriented dimensions, through moral cognitive processing, arouse other-directed emotions such as guilt and moral outrage, ultimately leading to fairness-maintaining prosocial behaviors [16,24]. This logic has been consistently validated in both interpersonal interaction and intergroup contexts.

4.2. Group Level: Intergroup Attitudes and Resource Allocation Tendencies

In recent years, research has gradually expanded to intergroup contexts, confirming that justice sensitivity can also predict the group attitudes of dominant groups, and the dimensional differentiation pattern is highly consistent with the individual level.

Regarding group attitudes and political preferences, research on Western dominant groups shows that victim sensitivity positively predicts support for right-wing populism and anti-immigrant attitudes—individuals high in victim sensitivity are more likely to perceive their ingroup as being "exploited" by outgroups, leading to group anger and exclusion tendencies; other-oriented sensitivity is positively associated with inclusive attitudes [25].

Regarding group solidarity and resource redistribution, beneficiary sensitivity positively predicts dominant groups' support for resource transfers to disadvantaged regions, for example, the higher the beneficiary sensitivity of West German citizens, the greater their support for tax transfers to East Germany[3]; observer sensitivity positively predicts cross-group solidarity, for instance, during the Euro crisis, individuals high in observer sensitivity showed stronger empathy for debtor countries and greater support for financial aid [26]. In contrast, victim sensitivity weakens group solidarity by exacerbating nationalist concerns [26]. Experimental research further confirmed that an information frame of "outgroup exploitation intent" strengthens the negative reactions of individuals high in victim sensitivity but does not affect the positive association between observer sensitivity and solidarity feelings, indicating that justice sensitivity is a stable personality foundation for individuals' understanding of intergroup relations[27].

5. Limitations of Current Research and Future Prospects

Although this field has accumulated substantial findings, limitations remain across multiple aspects. Future research can be deepened and expanded in the following directions.

First, expand research subjects and designs to reveal developmental patterns and group differences. Existing samples are predominantly adult university students, research on children and adolescents is scarce and mostly cross-sectional, lacking longitudinal tracking of the developmental trajectories and influencing factors of justice sensitivity; simultaneously, insufficient attention is given to special groups such as left-behind children and grassroots workers, limiting the generalizability of conclusions. Future research should conduct long-term longitudinal studies to reveal the developmental patterns and parenting influencing factors of

justice sensitivity, while also expanding samples from special groups to enhance ecological validity.

Second, enrich research methods and paradigms to strengthen causal inference and deep mechanisms. Existing research relies excessively on cross-sectional questionnaire surveys, with prominent common method bias and difficulty in clarifying causal relationships; the ecological validity of the few behavioral experiments is limited, and research on cognitive neural mechanisms is nearly absent. Future research can combine longitudinal tracking, experience sampling, field experiments, and other diverse methods to remedy causal inference deficiencies; introduce eye-tracking, EEG, and other neural technologies to explore the physiological basis and cognitive processing differences of justice sensitivity.

Third, deepen cultural adaptation research and build a localized theoretical framework. Both the concept and scales originated in Western individualistic cultures, and although the four-dimensional structure has been preliminarily validated in China, differences in Chinese and Western conceptions of justice and collectivism may lead to cultural boundaries regarding its connotation and effects. Current domestic research often directly applies Western frameworks, lacking systematic exploration of cultural adaptation. Future research should conduct cross-cultural comparative studies to test the boundary conditions of Western conclusions; optimize measurement tools by incorporating Chinese cultural characteristics such as the differential mode of association and collectivism, and gradually build a localized theoretical framework.

Fourth, integrate mechanisms of action to construct a systematic theoretical model. Existing mediation studies mostly focus on single variables such as anger and justice beliefs, lacking systematic integration of the complete path of "cognitive appraisal-emotional arousal-behavioral tendency"; moderation variables are mostly limited to demographic factors, with insufficient exploration of boundary conditions such as situational and personality variables. Future research should construct an integrative theoretical model based on fragmented evidence, systematically examine multi-level moderating variables, and clarify the boundary conditions for the effects of each dimension.

Fifth, strengthen application orientation and develop intervention practice research. Current research is primarily foundational theoretical, with applied value not fully realized: whether intervention programs could cultivate other-oriented sensitivity to reduce school bullying in educational settings, whether excessively high victim sensitivity could be targeted to improve emotional problems in clinical settings, and how organizations could utilize justice sensitivity to optimize management, all lack systematic exploration. Future research should strengthen application orientation, develop intervention programs for educational, managerial, clinical, and other settings, and promote the transformation of theoretical findings into practical applications.

6. Conclusion

Justice sensitivity, as a core personality variable characterizing individual differences in justice perception, has formed a mature four-dimensional structure model. Research has expanded from individual economic interactions to multiple fields including intimate relationships, organizational behavior, and intergroup attitudes, systematically revealing the dimensional differentiation effect of "self-oriented vs. other-oriented." Overall, victim sensitivity, centered on self-protection, tends to trigger conflict and negative psychology; observer, beneficiary, and perpetrator sensitivities, centered on moral constraints, generally promote prosocial behavior and fairness maintenance.

Although substantial research findings have been achieved, limitations remain, including narrow subject coverage, methodological constraints, and inadequate cultural adaptation.

Future research needs to further expand boundaries, deepen mechanism exploration, strengthen local adaptation and practical application, and promote the development of justice sensitivity research toward a more systematic and practically valuable direction.

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