

School experience, relational justice and legitimization of institutional

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This study analysis the relationship between perceptions of the justice of teacher' behaviour and (a) the legitimization of school authority and (b) the legitimization of institutional authorities outside school. 448 adolescent students participated in the study. In a questionnaire participants were asked about (a) perceptions of the justice of teachers' behaviour; (b) evaluation of the school experience; and (c) evaluation of institutional authorities. Results show that the evaluation of the justice of teacher behaviour, in particular relational and procedural justice, have an impact on the legitimization of the authority of teachers and on the evaluation of institutional authorities outside school. Results also show that the legitimacy granted to teachers is a mediator variable between perceptions of justice in school and evaluation of authorities outside school. These results are discussed in the context of the studies on the relationship between school experience and adolescents' attitudes towards authorities, and in the framework of the "Relational Model of Authority" and of the "Group Value Model".

This paper aims to contribute to understand the factors underlying the construction of adolescents' orientations towards authority. This objective derives from two types of studies and two parallel lines of thought that we bring together. The first type of studies are those conducted by Palmonari and Rubini (1998), Palmonari, Rubini, and Casoni (1999) and Rubini

We thank Nicholas Emler and an anonymous reviewer for their very helpful comments.

This research was partially funded by a doctoral scholarship (n° 13690/97) awarded to the first author by the Portuguese Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia.

and Palmonari (1995). These studies analyse the relationship between perceptions of school experience and adolescents' attitudes towards institutional authority. Some of these authors' perspectives derive from the research of Emler, Ohana, and Moscovici (1987), Emler and Reicher (1987), and Reicher and Emler (1985) on the development of orientations towards authority. Taken as a whole, these studies show that the perception of school experience is one of the factors associated with adolescents' attitudes towards institutional authorities.

The second type of studies which have directed our work deal with perceptions of procedural justice, in particular in the framework of the "Group-Value Model" (GVM) and of the "Relational Model of Authority" put forward by Lind and Tyler (1988), Tyler (1997), Tyler, Degoey, and Smith (1996), Tyler and Lind (1992). Studies based on these models show that the greater the perception of procedural justice, the greater the perception of legitimacy of family, organisational and public authorities.

The purpose of bringing together the two types of studies mentioned above is to contribute to a better understanding of the psychological processes underlying the relations between adolescents and authorities. Our general hypothesis is that the perception of the justice of teacher behaviour is a main predictor of the evaluation of institutional authorities. That is, the experience of justice in school is a critical factor in granting legitimacy to the authority of teachers; and the legitimacy attributed to teachers mediates the relationship between perceptions of justice in school and the evaluation of institutional authorities outside school.

Adolescence, perceptions of school experience and orientations to institutional authority

Palmonari and Rubini (1998) and Palmonari et al. (1999) see the acquiring of attitudes vis-à-vis the institutional system as implying that adolescents are able to decode the rules of that system, develop orientations based on awareness and on an evaluation of that system and develop a repertoire of behaviour in accordance with institutional rules. Thus the type and nature of orientations to the institutional system provide indicators of adolescents' position vis-à-vis that system, and give us information on their identity (Emler & Reicher, 1995).

Emler and co-authors (Emler, 1993; Emler et al., 1987; Emler & Reicher, 1987; Emler & Reicher, 1995) have suggested that the school experience has an enormous influence on how orientations to the institutional system are acquired, in as much as this experience can be regarded as the first relationship which adolescents establish with a social institution, and which enables them to understand other institutional systems. In fact, several studies (Murray & Thompson, 1985; Reicher & Emler, 1985; Rigby & Rump, 1979, 1981; Rigby, Schofield, & Slee, 1987) show a positive correlation between orientations to school authority and orientations towards authority in the broader sense.

In the same vein, Emler and James (1994), Emler and Reicher (1995), Rubini and Palmonari (1995) showed that objective school performance (success and failure in school), as well as the subjective perception of the school experience, together with peer group experiences influence the valence of attitudes to institutional authority. Specifically, Palmonari and Rubini (1998) and Palmonari et al. (1999) show that the school maladjustment influences attitudes towards institutional authorities. These authors suggest that this psychological state may be due to a variety of factors, such as: weak performance in school; negative results of social interaction in relations with teachers (intellectual and social skills) and in relations with schoolmates (feelings of marginalisation or rejection); an emotional inability to face up to school assessment and an inability to fit in with school rules. In order to test their hypothesis on the relationship between school maladjustment and attitudes to institutional authority, Palmonari and co-authors (1998, 1999) built and validated a measure of school maladjustment. A factorial analysis of this measure identified four dimensions: "adjustment to school rules", "self-confidence when facing school-assessment", "motivation to learn" and "being comfortable with the school experience". These authors then analysed the relationship between these dimensions and attitudes to institutional authority. In general

results show that school experience influences attitudes to institutional authorities. Following this research, Gouveia-Pereira and Pires (1999) identified three dimensions of the school experience ("adjusting to school rules", "self-confidence when facing school-assessment" and "being comfortable with the school experience") and showed that these dimensions correlate with dimensions of the evaluation of institutional authority ("compliance with duties *vis-à-vis* institutional authority", "perception of impartiality of the legal system" and "positive assessment of the legal system and of school authority").

From these studies as a whole we may conclude that adolescents who are able to adjust to school rules, who obtain recognition from teachers and have a gratifying and quality relationship with their peers are more likely to accept the rules and standards of institutions outside school. That is, they have a more positive orientation towards the institutional system.

It is accordingly with these studies that this research analyses the hypothesis whereby the more positive perceptions of school experience are, the more positive the assessment of institutional authority will be. In addition, this study brings a new aspect to the analysis of the school experience, which has not been taken into account in earlier research: adolescents' judgments of the justice of teacher behaviour. Our general hypothesis is that these judgements have a particular impact on the legitimacy granted to authorities, as has been shown in other areas of societal life (e.g., Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997).

Perceptions of justice and legitimation of institutional authorities

On the assumption that acceptance of the decisions of authority is greater when it is perceived to be legitimate, Lind and Tyler (1988) developed a research programme to understand the psychological processes which underlie the bestowal of legitimacy on authorities. Their hypothesis is that judgements of justice, in particular those which concern relational justice, are key elements in conferring legitimacy.

The "Group-Value Model" and the "Relational Model of Authority", proposed by Lind and Tyler (1988) and Tyler and Lind (1992) consider that judgements of justice are based not only on distributive aspects (Adams, 1965; Berkowitz & Walster, 1976), but also on judgements relating to procedural justice (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975) and to interactional justice (Bies & Moag, 1986). The authors of the "Group-Value Model" also suggest that the main features of the psychological dynamics of judgements of justice are not so much instrumental factors (Berkowitz & Walster, 1976; Thibaut & Walker, 1975) as identity and relational motives. According to this model, the more a decision of authority is perceived as being oriented by relational principles of neutrality, trustworthiness and status recognition, the more that decision is perceived as being just, and consequently is more acceptable, and encourages people to perceive authority as being legitimate. In psychological terms, relational aspects have an impact on perceptions of justice because people use the way they are treated as information on their worth and on the value of the group to which they belong.

These hypotheses found empirical support in different national and cultural contexts (e.g., Lind, Tyler, & Huo, 1997; Sousa & Vala, 2002; Tyler, Lind, Ohbuchi, Sugawara, & Huo, 1998). However, until now, these hypotheses were not analysed among adolescents in a high school context. Besides, only a few studies have analysed the perception of justice in school (e.g., Fan, Chan, & Ngan, 1999; Israelashvili, 1997), and these studies did not analyse the impact of justice on the evaluation of authorities. Note however that the potential impact of the procedural justice of teachers' behaviour on the evaluation of school authorities and on the evaluation of institutional authorities outside school may be supported by some studies carried out in the context of other theoretical approaches. For instance, Reicher and Emler (1985) showed a correlation between deviant behaviour, non-compliance with the law and disobeying institutional authority, and the belief that the legal system is biased and tendentious. Hirschi (1969) also demonstrated that adolescents who believe in the legitimacy of judicial authority do not break the law, while those who do not bestow legitimacy on this authority

tend to commit more acts of vandalism. In the same vein, Emler (1992) argues that the legitimacy of authority is associated with a perception that authority acts on the basis of impartial, impersonal and formally defined criteria.

Consequently, we have formulated the hypothesis that, apart from factors which relate to the school experience as studied by Palmonari and co-authors, perceptions of the justice of teachers' behaviour will correlate with perceptions of the legitimacy of school authority and with the evaluation of institutional authorities outside school. We expect that the more positive the perceptions of the justice of teacher' behaviour, the more positive will be the evaluation of school authority and of institutional authority. More specifically, and in accordance with the "group-value model", relational-procedural aspects of justice judgements are likely to be better predictors of how adolescents evaluate authority than distributive justice factors.

We have also formulated the hypothesis that the perception of the legitimacy of school authority is a mediator variable between perceptions of the justice of teachers' behaviour and assessment of institutional (legal, judicial) authority. Thus the more positive perceptions of the justice of teachers' behaviour are, the more positive the evaluation of the school authority will be. And, the more positive the assessment of the school authority, the more positive the assessment of institutional authority will be.

Moreover, given the importance of comparisons with one's peers in adolescence, which operate as fundamental points of reference in building self-image and in resolving development tasks (see Coleman & Hendry, 1990; Cotterell, 1996; Gouveia-Pereira, 1998; Harter, 1993; Palmonari, 1993; Peixoto, 1998), we have formulated the hypothesis that the influence of the comparative aspects (for example, "my teacher is as just with me as he is with other schoolmates") of judgements of justice on the relation to authority is as important as the influence of autonomous judgements (for example, "my teacher is unjust towards me").

Method

Participants

448 adolescents, pertaining to 5 different schools and 25 different classrooms, took part in this research. 234 participants were male (52%) and 214 female (48%), ranging in age from 15 to 18 years ($M=16.5$).

Measures

Perceptions of justice in the school context

Perceptions of relational justice. 11 items were used to measure the perception of relational justice in the school context. These items were selected according to Bies and Moag (1986) and Tyler et al. (1996) (for instance: "my teachers treat me with respect", "my teachers take my needs into account", or "my teachers take care to ensure that the classroom atmosphere is conducive to learning").

Perceptions of procedural justice. The following dimensions proposed by Leventhal (1980) were used: "accuracy of information", "correctability" and "representativeness" ("when my teachers take a decision about me they seek to understand everything that happened in a particular situation"; "when my teachers make mistakes they are able to recognise them"; "my teachers give me the chance to put forward my own points of view before taking a decision about me").

Perceptions of distributive justice. In order to measure the perception of distributive justice a global indicator ("in general my teachers give me fair marks") was used. Indicators

related with normative principles of distributive justice were also used ("in general my teachers have awarded me marks in accordance with the work I have done"; "in general my teachers have marked me according to what I deserve"; "my teachers generally reward me when I make an effort").

Perceptions of justice in a comparative perspective: "My teachers always treat me in the same manner as they treat other classmates", "The way in which teachers resolve problems with me is similar to the way in which they resolve them with my school mates" and "In awarding marks my teachers are as demanding of me as they are of my schoolmates".

These items were subjected to a Principal Components Factor Analysis (PCFA). Three factors explaining 50.3% of the total variance were extracted ($KMO=0.90$). The first factor was saturated by the items of relational and procedural justice; the second factor brought together the items of distributive justice; the third factor aggregated the items which refer to the perception of justice of a comparative nature. Many other studies aggregate relational and procedural items in a single factor (e.g., Folger, 1996; Sousa & Vala, 2002; Vermunt, Van der Kloote, & Van der Meer, 1993). People find it hard to distinguish between these two analytical dimensions of the experience of justice, whereas they have no trouble in distinguishing between the distributive dimension and the relational/procedural aspects. The factor aggregating the comparative judgements of justice shows, in accordance with our hypotheses, that adolescents build their perceptions on the basis of social comparisons. Based on this PCFA, three variables were constructed: relational/procedural justice ($\alpha=0.85$; $M=3.50$, $SD=0.63$); distributive justice ($\alpha=0.84$; $M=3.50$, $SD=0.73$); and the comparative dimension of perceptions of justice ($\alpha=0.65$; $M=3.58$, $SD=0.76$).

Evaluation of the school experience

11 items were used to study this dimension. This measure was constructed on the basis of the studies of Palmonari et al. (1999) and Rubini and Palmonari (1995) on school maladjustment. Principal-components factor analysis identified 3 factors (explained variance=63.5%; $KMO=0.81$), on the basis of which we constructed three indices for evaluation of the school experience.

Evaluation of school rules: "The rules are there for the benefit of the teachers", "Most school rules are stupid" "Rules do not safeguard pupils from the injustices of the teachers" and "School rules are very rigid" ($\alpha=0.75$; $M=2.90$, $SD=0.77$).

Evaluation of the relationship with schoolmates: "I feel good when I can show that I worth something and I am recognised by my schoolmates", "A good relationship with my schoolmates helps me to feel good", "It is important for me to obtain the confidence of my schoolmates" and "I feel bad if my schoolmates leave me out of things" ($\alpha=0.72$; $M=4.17$, $SD=0.51$).

Feelings associated with school performance: "I feel bad when I get low marks", "I am often afraid of not getting good results in school" and "I am afraid of what my teachers think of me" ($\alpha=0.68$; $M=2.76$, $SD=0.48$).

Evaluation of authorities

In order to evaluate authorities we took into account separately the perception of teachers' legitimacy and the evaluation of legal (police and law) and judicial authorities.

Perceptions of the legitimacy of teachers' authority. In measuring perceptions of teacher's legitimacy we considered three dimensions (Tyler, 1997): "Acceptance of the decisions of authority" (e.g., 'in general terms I accept my teachers' decisions'), "competence of authority" (e.g., 'I feel that my teachers are competent as teachers') and "evaluation of

authority" (e.g., 'indicate the manner in which you evaluate your teachers generally here in your school'). These 6 items were aggregated into a new variable ($\alpha=0.73$; $M=3.46$; $SD=0.67$).

Evaluation of judicial authority. This measure and the following measures include items from the scales of evaluation of authorities constructed by Emler and Reicher (1987), Rubini and Palmonari (1995) and Tyler (1990, 1997). In order to measure the evaluation of *judicial authority* seven items were used: "Judges are more protective of the better-off", "Courts/judges give people a chance to state their point of view", "Judges are honest in the decisions they take", "The courts/judges treat people with respect and consideration", "In general, the decisions of the courts/judges are nearly always fair", "When the courts/judges sentence someone, the sentence is in general appropriate to what that person has done", "The courts are there in order to make society better for everyone" ($\alpha=0.78$; $M=3.14$, $SD=0.53$).

Evaluation of legal authority (the law and the police): *evaluation of the law* was conducted on the basis of the following items – "Laws safeguard the rights of all citizens" "It is fair to break the law if no-one gets hurt", "People should comply with the law even if they don't agree with it", "People who refuse to comply with the law are a threat to society", "Laws are made in order to make society better for everyone" ($\alpha=0.72$; $M=3.43$, $SD=0.68$). *Evaluation of the police:* "The police treats all people in the same manner (regardless of race, sex, nationality, etc.)", "Most policemen are honest", "The police listen to people before they make decisions about them", "The police is there to make society better for everyone", "The police treat people with respect/consideration", "Sometimes the police fine people unjustly", "Sometimes the police arrest people unjustly", "The police spend more time protecting the rich than helping normal people" ($\alpha=0.75$; $M=2.68$, $SD=0.58$).

Following Reicher and Emler (1985), and Palmonari et al. (1999), we aggregated the measures of the evaluation of police, law and the judicial system and we constructed a new variable: *evaluation of institutional authorities* ($\alpha=0.65$; $M=3.01$, $SD=0.64$).

The items were evaluated on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Procedures

The questionnaire was filled in individually during a classroom period given over to this specific purpose, and with no teachers present. Filling in the questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes.

Results

What is the relation between the dimensions of the school experience, the legitimization of school authority and the evaluation of the legal and judicial authorities?

Table 1 shows that the variables used in the study are correlated but without problems of multi-collinearity. Then, in order to analyse the association of school experience dimensions with the evaluation of school authority, we conducted a multiple regression analysis. Results show that evaluation of school rules is significantly associated with bestowal of legitimacy on teachers (Table 2). In other words, the more adolescents feel school rules protect them, and are not biased, the more they will voluntarily accept the decisions of authority. We also found that this aspect is significantly associated with evaluation of the judicial and legal system (police and law) (Table 2). It should also be noted that evaluation of the law is correlated with feelings associated with school performance and that the evaluation of relations with schoolmates is not correlated with the evaluation of authorities.

Table 1

Correlations between variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Relational justice	—										
2 Distributive justice	.53	—									
3 Comparative dimension of justice	.42	.36	—								
4 Evaluation of school rules	.38	.31	.19	—							
5 Evaluation of relationship with schoolmates	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	—						
6 Feelings associated with school performance	.12	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	—					
7 Legitimacy of school authority	.53	.33	.34	.26	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	—				
8 Police Evaluation	.37	.32	.27	.30	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	.31	—			
9 Law Evaluation	.18	<i>n.s.</i>	.14	.20	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	.18	.27	—		
10 Judiciary system evaluation	.33	.34	.35	.29	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	.20	.47	.30	—	
11 Index of Institutional Authority	.42	.36	.35	.35	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	.33	.84	.60	.79	—

Note. *n.s.*=statistically not significant; all the other correlations are statistically significant ($p<0.01$).

Table 2

The school experience as a predictor of evaluations of institutional authorities (MRA)

	Legitimacy of school authority	Police	Law	Judiciary	Index of institutional authority
Evaluation of school rules	0.26**	0.30**	0.20**	0.28**	0.36**
Evaluation of relationship with schoolmates	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
Feelings associated with school performance	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	0.16*	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
<i>R</i> ²	0.10	0.12	0.10	0.11	0.19

Note. *n.s.*= statistically not significant; * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.001$.

Are the dimensions of school experience and the dimensions of perception of justice predictors of the legitimation of school authority and of the evaluation of legal and judicial authorities?

In the previous section we verified, in accordance with earlier studies, that the evaluation of school rules is a predictor of the legitimation of teachers and of the evaluation of the institutional system. We will now look at the hypothesis whereby perception of the justice of teachers' behaviour is a critical variable in the perception of school experience, having significant relationships with the legitimation of teachers' authority and with the evaluation of legal and judicial institutions. Table 3 shows that the introduction of perceptions of justice into the regression equations increases the explained variance (with the exception of evaluation of the law, the explained variance doubles in relation to earlier regression equations (Table 2). In a more detailed way, results show that, with the exception of the evaluation of the judicial system, perceptions of relational/procedural justice are more strongly related than perceptions of distributive justice with the evaluation of different systems of authority. Moreover, in line with our hypotheses, the comparative aspect of justice judgements, with the exception of evaluation of the law, is a significant predictor of evaluation of authority. This result suggests that adolescents' judgements concerning justice are not just "autonomous," but also "comparative". Overall, these results show that the perception of relational/procedural justice is the variable which best helps us to understand legitimation of teachers' behaviour and a positive attitude to the legal and judicial system. Note however that this analysis and the following ones are correlational analyses and, consequently, they don't allow a cause-effect interpretation.

Table 3

The school experience and the perception of justice as predictors of institutional authorities (MRA)

	<i>Legitimacy of school authority</i>				<i>Index of institutional authority</i>
	<i>Police</i>	<i>Law</i>	<i>Judiciary</i>		
Evaluation of school rules	<i>n.s.</i>	0.23***	0.17**	0.21*	0.24***
Evaluation of relationship with schoolmates	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
Feelings associated with school performance	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	0.17*	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
Relational justice	0.50***	0.29***	0.17**	0.13*	0.23***
Distributive justice	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	0.16**	0.11*
Comparative dimension of justice	0.15*	0.14*	<i>n.s.</i>	0.28***	0.21***
<i>R</i> ²	0.30	0.21	0.11	0.22	0.28

Note. *n.s.*=statistically not significant; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Does legitimacy of school authority mediate the effects of the perception of justice in the evaluation of institutional authority?

In our third hypothesis we propose that the effects of the experience of justice and of injustice of teachers' behaviour on the evaluation of institutional authority are mediated by the bestowal of legitimacy on teachers. In order to analyse the mediation hypothesis we followed the methodology suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). These authors propose a process of multi-stage regression analyses as being the most suitable for testing the mediating role of a variable.

a) *Stage 1 of analysis of mediation: the relationship between the independent variables (perception of justice) and the mediator variable (legitimacy of school authority)*

At this first level we conducted two analyses of regression. We regressed the mediator variable (legitimacy of school authority) on the independent variables (perceptions of justice). Next, we calculated a new regression equation by introducing the final dependent variable (evaluation of institutional authority), so as to control for the covariation between mediator and dependent variables (Table 4). The first regression analysis shows that relational aspects of justice as well as the comparative dimension of justice perception are predictors of the legitimation of teachers. In the second regression analysis, it can be seen that when the dependent variable is introduced into the regression equation there is still a significant relation between the perception of justice and the legitimacy of authority.

Table 4

Relationship between dimensions of justice and legitimacy (MRA)

Dimensions of perception of justice	Legitimacy of school authority Beta values
Relational justice	0.48***
Distributive justice	<i>n.s.</i>
Comparative dimension of perception of justice	0.17
<i>R</i> ²	0.30
Index of institutional authority	0.14*
Relational justice	0.45***
Distributive justice	<i>n.s.</i>
Comparative dimension of perception of justice	0.12*
<i>R</i> ²	0.34

Note. *n.s.*=statistically not significant; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

b) *Stage 2 – the relationship between the mediator variable and the dependent variable*

In this second stage of analysis of mediation we started by regressing the dependent variable (evaluation of institutional authority) on teacher legitimacy (mediator variable). Next we controlled for the relationship between the dependent variable and independent (perceptions of justice) variables, introducing them into the regression equation together with teacher legitimacy. The mediator variable affects institutional authority and continues to do so even when the independent variables are included (Table 5).

Table 5

Relationship between legitimacy of school authority and institutional authority (MRA)

Legitimacy and independent variables	Institutional Authority Beta values
Legitimacy of school authority	0.36***
R2	0.13*
Legitimacy of school authority	0.10*
Relational justice	0.25***
Distributive justice	0.13**
Comparative dimension of justice	0.14*
R2	0.25

Note. n.s.=statistically not significant; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 6

Relationship between dimensions of justice and institutional authority (MRA)

Dimensions of the perception of justice and moderating variable	Institutional Authority Beta values
Relational justice	0.37***
Distributive justice	0.14*
Comparative dimension of justice	0.18**
R2	0.24
Legitimacy of school authority	0.10*
Relational justice	0.25***
Distributive justice	0.13**
Comparative dimension of perception of justice	0.14**
R2	0.25

Note. n.s.=statistically not significant; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

c) *Stage 3 – The role of the legitimacy of school authority (mediator variable) between independent and the dependent variables*

At this stage we sought to have the independent variables affecting the dependent variable, which does in fact occur. In order to obtain a perfect mediation this relation should disappear when the mediator variable is controlled. Mediation will be partial when the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable goes down but does not disappear. Results presented in Table 6 show that the relation between relational justice and the evaluation of institutional authorities as well as the relation between comparative dimension of justice perception and the evaluation of institutional authorities are partially mediated by the perception of legitimacy of school authority.

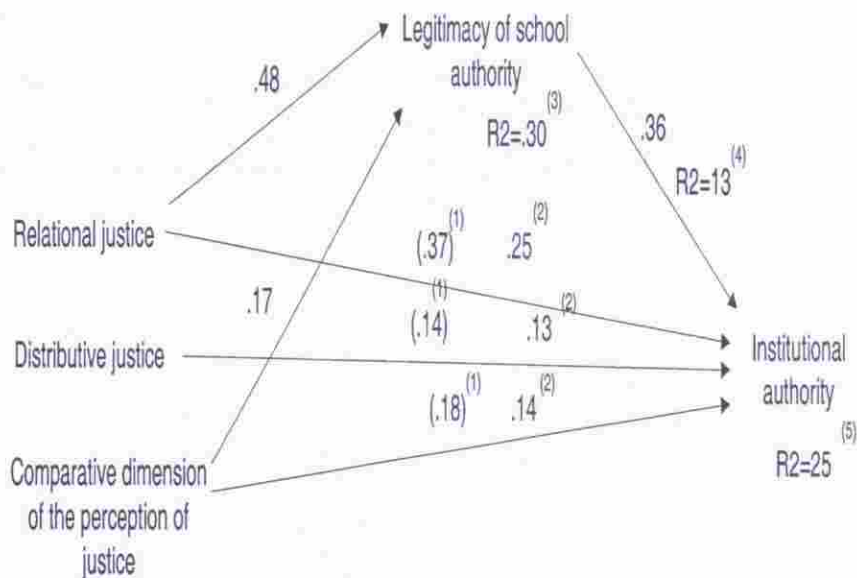


Figure 1. Summary of results: Does the legitimacy of school authority mediate the effects of the perception of the justice of teacher behaviour on the evaluation of institutional authority?

Note. (1) Beta values before control of the covariation of the mediator variable (legitimacy of school authority); (2) Beta values after control of the covariation of the mediator variable (legitimacy of school authority); (3) R2 relative to the regression of mediator variable on independent variables (perception of justice); (4) R2 relative to the regression of dependent variable (institutional authority) on mediator variable (legitimacy of school authority); (5) R2 relative to the regression of the institutional authority on all independent variable (and the mediator variable – legitimacy of school authority).

Discussion and conclusions

The results of this research show a clear relationship between the perception of relational justice and the adolescents' evaluations of teachers. As stated in our hypotheses, perception of justice is the main explanatory factor for the legitimacy of school authority and the evaluation of authorities outside school. In fact, both the legitimacy of school authority and the evaluation of authorities outside school are better explained by the perception of justice than by the perception of school experience in a restricted sense (evaluation of school rules, feelings associated with school results, evaluation of relationships with fellow-students).

This research also shows that the bestowal of legitimacy on teachers and their proposals is influenced more by relational and procedural justice than by distributive aspects. It should be emphasised that the distributive dimension of justice includes the perception of the justice of the marks given by teachers. Consequently, the results show that in the teacher-pupil relationship relational aspects of judgements of justice are more important than the perception of the justice of the marks given.

These results allow us to infer that adolescents accept the decisions and proposals of teachers on the basis of a fair treatment and not so much on the basis of the evaluation of the justice of school results. These data can represent a contribution to validating the "Relational Model of Authority" given that it had not, until now, been evaluated in a high school context. It should however be noted that our study is a correlational study and, consequently, it does not allow us to establish causal relationships. For instance, one can discuss the possible overlap between dimensions of teacher's legitimacy and dimensions of procedural justice.

We also observed, in line with our hypotheses, that the perception of just treatment on the part of teachers has implications not only on the school life of adolescents, but also predicts their representations of authorities outside school. In fact, our study shows that the association of relational and procedural justice judgements with the evaluation of institutional authorities (legal and judicial authorities) is greater than the association of instrumental judgements with this same evaluation. If only experimental studies can demonstrate the hypothesis of a causal relationship between perceptions of justice and legitimation of authorities assumed by the Group Value Model, the results of the present research are strong enough to offer some support to this same hypothesis. Moreover, the articulation between our results and the main results of studies on organizational justice and legitimation of authorities (for a review, Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997; Greenberg, 1996) also give additional support to our conclusions. However, it should be noted that this study is a first study that explicitly explore the possible relationships between perceptions of school experience, perceptions of justice and relations with institutional authorities.

The relevance of the perception of comparative justice on the evaluation of authority

We observed that the comparative aspect of judgements of justice is a predictor of both the legitimacy bestowed on teachers and of the evaluation of authorities outside school. In other words, our results suggest, as we had foreseen, that judgements of the justice of teacher behaviour by adolescents have a foundation, which is not only "autonomous" but also "comparative". Contrary to the Group Value Model which has tended to stress the autonomous aspect of judgements of justice (Tyler & Blader, 2000), our study stresses the comparative aspect of those judgements.

The role of comparative processes highlighted in this research may be related to ecological factors, in the sense used by Bronfenbrenner (1979), namely with the object of study. In fact, the results obtained under the GVM (Tyler, 1994) which show that comparative judgements are not relevant predictors of acceptance of the decisions of authority were obtained with adults and in social contexts other than school.

In highlighting the importance of the comparative dimension, the results of our study show up specific processes of the psychological development of adolescents. The literature shows that social comparison is a prominent process in the evaluation of self and others and in the construction of the self (Festinger, 1954; Frey & Ruble, 1985; Lockwood & Kunda, 2000; Tesser, 1988). But it is probably in adolescence that social comparisons are most relevant (e.g., Harter, 1993). The various changes the adolescent goes through, together with greater vulnerability, may indicate that comparisons with peers take on a more significant role than in adulthood. In addition, adolescents are undergoing a process of redefinition of the self, and in that process they use peers as a comparative referent (e.g., Baumeister, 1998; Bosma & Jackson, 1990).

Perception of the legitimacy of school authority as a mediator of the legitimacy of institutional authority outside school

We have emphasised the role of the perception of the justice of teacher behaviour in legitimising their authority and in legitimising institutional authorities outside school. But our hypothesis on the mediating role of the legitimacy bestowed on teachers on the evaluation of institutional authorities also received support. We may therefore propose that the legitimation of teachers by adolescents functions as a mediator variable between the perception of justice in school and the evaluation of institutional authority outside school. In other words, the more adolescents accept teachers' proposals, the more positively they will evaluate authorities outside school.

In a weberian approach (Weber, 1919-1922/1989), adolescents' orientations towards the institutional system are founded on the legitimacy they bestow on social rules and social norms. Relationships to institutional authority derive from a legally established impersonal

and rational order, and not from personal preferences or family connections. In addition, adolescents also learn to respect a teacher because he is "a teacher", and not just on account of the more or less positive personal attributes which characterise each specific teacher. Following along this line of thought, our study shows that procedural justice in school provides adolescents with the necessary affective and cognitive foundations for the development of positive orientations towards the institutional system outside school.

The relation between the evaluation of school rules and the evaluation of institutional authority

Our results highlight the importance of perceptions of justice in school on the evaluation of institutional authorities, but do not put in question (rather they corroborate) the studies by Rubini and Palmonari (1995), Palmonari et al. (1999), Emler and Reicher (1987) and Reicher and Emler (1985), according to which the evaluation of school rules is correlated with the evaluation of institutional authority.

Explicit rules which are regarded as positive, protective and effective may operate as a normative frame of reference which facilitates the regulation of the social life of the class, and, probably, the regulation of the social life of the whole school. When adolescents interiorise a positive normative frame of reference (a just treatment by the teacher) this leads to the perception of other authorities as just (the police, the law and the courts), even when there has been no previous direct experience of a relationship with these types of authority. This fact is all the more important the more orientations towards institutional authority become a specific development task for adolescents, with significant repercussions in public adult life (Palmonari, 1993). Thus the highlighting in due time of the difficulties which adolescents feel in their relationships with teachers and in adjusting to school rules may help them in their school careers, in the prevention of anti-social behaviours, and in the development of a positive attitude to institutional authority.

Implications of relational justice on the school processes

Bearing in mind the results of this research, we now suggest that further studies should be conducted in two specific areas: the analysis of the relationship between the perception of justice in school and undisciplined behaviour in the classroom, and the analysis of the relationship between the perception of justice and adolescents' self-esteem in the school context.

A number of studies on teachers' representations of lack of discipline tell us of their feelings of disrespect and contempt when faced with undisciplined behaviour on the part of pupils (Carita 1992; Mollo, 1986). At the same time, the meanings which teachers attribute to lack of discipline are associated with disobedience and rudeness to the teacher (Mollo, 1979), with aggressive, disruptive and exhibitionist behaviour (Estrela, 1986), and to infringement of school rules (Amado, 2000). We know that several factors contribute to the occurrence of the phenomenon of lack of discipline in the classroom (Fontana, 1995, 1998) such as, for example, family-related factors (Carlson, 1990; Weels, 1987) and low academic self-esteem (Truscott, 1992). We also know that these behaviours emerge in the context of the teacher-pupil relationship, and that their resolution depends above all on the behaviour of the teacher and the quality of the interaction between teacher and pupil. It is in this context that our results suggest that the perception of justice of teacher behaviour may lead to less disruptive behaviours in the classroom. Thus, and despite the fact that our data does not enable us to analyse the causes of undisciplined behaviours, they suggest that the occurrence of disobedience on the part of pupils may derive, at least for the most part, from a perception of the injustice of teacher behaviour. In addition our study also shows that in their relationship with teachers adolescents value the chance to express personal opinions and being recognized as people. In fact, Durrant (1995) suggests that if pupils feel they are heard and understood by their teachers, then disruptive behaviour in the classroom tends to decline. In this way, the development of research on justice in school may help us to understand the processes which lie behind indiscipline in school.

Regarding self-esteem in the school context, the GVM may also give us new ways of understanding this. Indeed, under this model perceptions of justice not only contribute to better individual adaptation to the group prototype and to the legitimation of authority. They also contribute to the development of positive self-esteem (Tyler, Smith, & Huo, 1996). In the framework of GVM, the quality of relational treatment and the quality of procedures provide people with information on their value to the group, and consequently contribute to positive self-esteem. In this way we need to find out to what extent, in the school context, and with adolescents, the perception of justice may, in actual fact, increase their self-esteem and in this way contribute not only to their psychological well-being but also to their performance in school.

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Cette recherche analyse les relations entre la perception de justice des comportements des professeurs, la légitimation de l'autorité scolaire et la légitimation des autorités institutionnelles en dehors l'école. 448 lycéens ont participé dans cette étude. Les participants ont répondu à un questionnaire portant sur (a) les perceptions de justice des comportements des professeurs, (b) l'évaluation de l'expérience scolaire, et (c) l'évaluation des autorités institutionnelles. Les résultats montrent que plus élevé est la perception de justice des comportements des professeurs, plus élevé est aussi la légitimité attribuée aux

professeurs et la légitimité attribuée aux autorités en dehors de l'école. Les résultats montrent aussi que la légitimité attribuée aux professeurs est une variable médiatrice entre la perception de justice des comportements des professeurs et l'évaluation des autorités en dehors de l'école. Ces résultats sont discutés dans le cadre des recherches sur la formation des attitudes des adolescents relativement aux autorités institutionnelles et dans le cadre du "Modèle de la Valeur du Groupe" ("Group Value Model") et de "l'approche relationnelle de l'autorité".

Key words: Attitudes towards authorities, Experiences of justice in school, Perceptions of justice, Relational and procedural justice.

Received: October 2002

Revision received: June 2003

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Rubini, M., & Palmonari, A. (in press). Adolescents' relationships to the institutional order. In A.E. Jackson & L. Gooessens (Eds.), *A handbook of Adolescent Development: European Perspectives*. Psychology Press.

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