

# Perceived justice of cost distribution during an epidemic: the influence of social determinants

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Fighting an epidemic is a collective action. It is mainly aimed to maintain such public good as access to medical aid and help for those in need. In such moments of crisis, concerns about justice often rise due to the necessity of making decisions to whom the scarce resources should be allocated. But there is another type of concern that raises the question of who should bear the costs during this collective action. The answers to this question are highly debatable and diverse but not entirely individually determined. There are some social factors that affect these normative judgments leaning them toward certain social norms and ideological attitudes.

Therefore, this study examines the effects of social interaction level and the type of allocated resources on ordinary normative judgments about distributive justice during the epidemic. More precisely, it explores the evaluations of cost allocations that are made from the third party's point of view. Basing our predictions on the descriptive distributive justice theories (Hegtvedt, 2005; Девятко, 2009) and the social resource theory (Foa and Foa, 2012), we investigated the effect of the levels of social interaction on the local community of neighbors (meso-) level and the residential community of town inhabitants (macro-) level. The types of allocated resources we tested were money (more universalistic) and work (less universalistic).

Employing the factorial survey method and recruiting the participants from a commercial opt-in panel in June 2020, we received both theoretically predicted as well as unexpected results. The experiment revealed the significant influence of the studied factors on the distributive justice perception. As predicted by social resource theory, the participants were more inclined to the compensatory distribution while allocating working hours rather than monetary payments.

Although the second factor was also significant, the participants were more inclined to the compensatory distribution of costs when the allocation took place among town inhabitants rather than among neighbors, while the opposite effect was expected. The known theoretical models predict the more pronounced preferences of the compensatory distributions among neighbors due to the higher perceived level of interdependence (Greenberg and Cohen 1982, 444) and the probability of further interaction (Cook and Hegtvedt 1983) among the members of smaller groups, compared to the town-level distributions.

Expectedly, none of the control variables, such as age, gender, income level, city size, or degree of "the belief in a just world", showed a significant effect or interaction. The results of the experiment confirm the relevance of social resource theory for the explanation of the perception of distributive justice and challenge the established

theoretical models demonstrating some unintuitive links between the levels of social interaction and ordinary normative judgments about just cost distribution. We provide probable explanations for the observed effects, propose some further directions of research, and discuss the implications of these results for public policy decisions during the epidemics.

## References

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