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Effects of Discrete Emotions on Distributive, Procedural, and Interactional Justice

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Abstract

We examined the effects of naturally occurring discrete emotions (happiness, anger, pride, resentment) on individuals' perceptions of distributive, procedural and interactional justice. Results revealed that happy and proud participants rated all three forms of fairness significantly higher than angry and resentful participants. This study presents a first look at emotions as an antecedent to fairness perceptions.

Effects of Discrete Emotions on Distributive, Procedural, and Interactional Justice

Researchers of organizational justice have studied the behavioral and attitudinal reactions to perceptions of fairness for some time (Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Folger & Greenberg, 1985). Perceptions of justice refer to the evaluation of the fairness of outcomes, processes, and interpersonal treatment (Adams, 1965; Bies & Moag, 1986; Folger & Greenberg, 1985; Leventhal, 1980; Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). The literature is abundant with examples showing that justice matters in the workplace. For example, researchers have shown that individuals demonstrate higher levels of job performance, greater levels of commitment, increased job and pay satisfaction, greater levels of trust, and more organizational citizenship behaviors when they feel that decision making processes are fair, and that they have been treated fairly (e.g., Byrne & Cropanzano, 2000; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Cropanzano & Greenberg, 1997; Konovsky & Cropanzano, 1991; Malatesta & Byrne, 1997; Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000; Moorman, 1991; Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002; Skarlicki & Latham, 1996, 1997; Tyler & Lind, 1992; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002).

Although attitudinal and behavioral consequences to fairness perceptions have been examined, not as much research has been conducted to understand the antecedents of fairness. Since fairness has consistently been shown to influence key organizational attitudes and behaviors, it appears necessary that we begin to more thoroughly examine constructs that might influence fairness perceptions. Specifically, in this study we tested whether discrete emotions affect three distinct types of fairness judgments: judgments about outcomes, judgments about procedures, and judgments about interpersonal treatment. We first provide a brief overview of

these three forms of fairness and then turn our focus to the study of emotions and mood, and how these constructs might affect and possibly shape justice perceptions.

Perceptions of Organizational Justice

Justice researchers have consistently identified three different types of fairness perceptions: distributive, procedural, and interactional (Colquitt et al., 2001). Distributive justice perceptions refer to judgments about the fairness of the outcomes an individual receives (Deutsch, 1985). In this study distributive justice referred to the fairness of the actual grades students received from their professors. Procedural justice refers to judgments made about the fairness of the procedures used to make a decision or allocate a resource (e.g., Folger & Greenberg, 1985). In this study, fair procedures referred to the fairness of how professors determined the grades for students. Finally, interactional justice refers to the perceived fairness of the interpersonal treatment received during the implementation of a procedure (Bies & Moag, 1986). In an organizational context, interactional justice often refers to the degree to which a supervisor treats subordinates politely and with respect. In our study, interactional justice refers to whether professors were respectful when sharing the grades with individual students. It is important in assessing and examining fairness perceptions that they are relevant to the situation (e.g., Colquitt, 2001).

Substantial justice research has targeted the examination of fairness perceptions to a specific event or process such as a performance appraisal or selection situation. For example, Gilliland (1994) examined organizational justice of selection processes. Similarly, Korsgaard and Roberson (1995) have examined fairness within performance appraisal processes. On the other hand, there is a body of justice research which has been based in the laboratory using vignettes or scenarios depicting fair and unfair procedures and outcomes, and assessing reactions

to these events (e.g., Greenberg, 1993; van den Bos, Wilke, & Lind, 1998). Regardless of the approach, field or laboratory setting, few researchers have examined the antecedents to fairness outside of specific events (e.g., performance appraisal feedback, simulated social dilemmas). This suggests that most of this justice literature has framed the environment in which participants make their justice judgments. It might be possible that this framing and setting the context for justice judgments actually affects them (Levin & Gaeth, 1988; Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998). We, therefore, believe that the current study is a first step in adding to the justice literature by examining the affect of naturally occurring emotions on the three types of fairness described above.

Mood Affects Judgments and Behavior

Our supposition that perhaps emotions are an antecedent to fairness perceptions is based on research in the mood and emotions literature. Research has shown that mood states have an influence on the evaluations individuals make about people and events (Bower, 1981; Clark & Fiske, 1982; George, 1991; Moore & Isen, 1990; O'Malley & Davies, 1984; Sinclair & Mark, 1992). For example, in a study of mood and performance appraisal Sinclair (1988) found that ratings of performance information about a teacher showed greater halo effects when raters were in a positive mood as compared to raters in a depressed mood state. Furthermore, Sinclair found that participants in positive moods rated the teacher more positively overall than did participants in neutral or depressed mood states. Consistent with Sinclair, Isen and colleagues (Isen, Shalker, Clark, & Karp, 1978) showed that individuals who rated being in a good mood made more positive judgments than did members of a control group. They concluded that in certain contexts, a positive mood serves as a cue for influencing decisions.

In an explanation of the effect of positive mood on evaluations, researchers suggest that individuals in positive moods tend to retrieve information and memories that are positive (Clark & Fiske, 1982). Individuals make mood-congruent judgments and this appears to be a reliable phenomenon (Mayer, 2001; Mayer, Gaschke, Braverman, & Evans, 1992). In addition, people who are in a good mood are less likely to closely examine the arguments presented to them (Bless, Bohner, Schwarz, & Strack, 1990).

Negative mood-congruent judgments may also occur. Although the research is sparse, evidence exists for the effect of negative moods on behaviors and judgments. For example, temporarily depressed individuals and those with a negative outlook perceive themselves as having less social support (Cohen, Towbes, & Flocco, 1988; Vinokur, Schul, & Caplan, 1987). When asked what was going on in their life, participants replied based on their current mood (Schwarz, 1990; Schwarz, Strack, Kommer, & Wagner, 1987). Prior research findings also show that sad individuals seem to engage in a cost/benefit analysis before deciding whether to engage in helping behaviors (Schaller & Cialdini, 1990). This cost/benefit analysis appears very similar to the ratio calculation performed when forming distributive fairness judgments (e.g., Adams, 1965). Adams (1965) proposed that individuals make cognitive evaluations of the ratio between their contributions and the resultant outcomes (i.e. economic or social compensation), as compared to the perceived ratio of others' input and returns, in making distributive justice judgments.

It appears that mood research has shown evidence for positive moods resulting in more favorable judgments and negative moods resulting in more unfavorable judgments. Consistent with this evidence supporting mood-congruent judgments, we expected that positive and negative discrete emotions would show similar effects on judgments of fairness.

Discrete Emotions versus Moods. Weiss, Suckow, and Cropanzano (1999) suggest that researchers examine discrete emotions (e.g., anger, guilt, pride, and happiness) as opposed to diffusive states of mood because different reactions can be attributed to specific discrete emotions. Therefore, in keeping with the recommendation of Weiss et al. (1999), rather than simply examining positive or negative moods, we evaluated the effects of discrete emotions on fairness perceptions. We examined the same four discrete emotions as Weiss et al. (1999) with one exception; we replaced guilt with resentment. We felt strongly that college students signing up for a research study would rarely walk into the study feeling guilty. Based on our experiences and anecdotal evidence from other researchers, we anticipated that college students would be more inclined to feel resentful for having to take their personal time to complete a research credit. Given that we were unable to find published literature to suggest differences in how the four discrete emotions might affect each of the three forms of fairness, we were unable to hypothesize differential effects for emotions on the three justices. Consistent with the mood literature, we therefore hypothesized that:

H1: Participants who report feeling happy will rate **(a)** distributive, **(b)** procedural, and **(c)** interactional justice higher than individuals who report feeling angry.

H2: Participants who report feeling happy will rate **(a)** distributive, **(b)** procedural, and **(c)** interactional justice higher than individuals who report feeling resentful.

H3: Participants who report feeling proud will rate **(a)** distributive, **(b)** procedural, and **(c)** interactional justice higher than individuals who report feeling angry.

H4: Participants who report feeling happy will rate **(a)** distributive, **(b)** procedural, and **(c)** interactional justice higher than individuals who report feeling resentful.

Method

Participants

A total of 504 undergraduate students enrolled in a general psychology course at a western university participated as part of a class research requirement. We purposely sought a large sample size in order to increase the likelihood that our sample would include participants experiencing the range of emotions necessary for our study. Participants' age ranged from 17 to 42 years of age, with the average age of 19.44 years. Approximately 54% of the sample was female. Approximately 87% identified themselves as Caucasian, 4% Latino/Hispanic, 2.4% Asian/Indian/Island Pacific, 0.8% African American, and 5% chose not to report their ethnicity.

Procedures

After completing an informed consent form, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire measuring four discrete emotions (angry, happy, proud, and resentful), distributive, procedural, and interactional fairness perceptions, and general demographic information. For this first examination of the effects of discrete emotions on fairness perceptions, we chose to examine naturally occurring emotions rather than induce extremes that may or may not be seen in normal college student populations. Participants' current emotional state was measured prior to administering any other questionnaire, in order to determine their mood before making fairness evaluations.

Measures.

Similar to Weiss et al. (1999) we measured two positive emotions (happy and proud), and two negative emotions (angry and resentful). Participants were asked to rate "at this moment I feel" the four discrete emotions on a response scale ranging from (1) not at all to (5) very much.

We assessed distributive, procedural, and interactional justice using Colquitt's (2001) measures. All justice items were rated on a five-point response scale ranging from (1) to a small

extent to (5) to a great extent. As suggested by Colquitt, items were tailored to fit the context in which the data were collected -- in our case, an educational setting. We modified the instructions on the procedural justice items to refer to the procedures that their general psychology instructor used to give exams and determine points received on exams; interactional items to refer to the general psychology instructor who gives the course exams; and the distributive justice items to refer to the number of points typically received on exams. We obtained alpha reliability coefficients of .75 for procedural justice, .91 for interactional justice and .87 for distributive justice.

Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, intercorrelations, and reliability estimates for the variables in this study. Reliability estimates were all greater than .70, which is within an acceptable range for research purposes (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Because participants were asked to rate all four discrete emotions, it was possible for them to rate them all high, even though not all emotions are compatible and can actually be felt at the same time (e.g., angry and happy). Therefore, in order to adequately test our hypotheses we felt it necessary to create comparison groups for each discrete emotion following the coding scheme of Berkman's (1971) Psychological Wellbeing scale. To be considered happy, participants had to rate feeling happy a 3 (somewhat) or greater and rate feeling angry or resentful less than a 3. To be considered angry, participants had to rate feeling angry a 3 or greater and happy or proud less than a 3. To be considered proud, participants had to rate pride equal to or greater than a 3, and resentful or angry less than 3. And finally, to be considered resentful, participants had to rate feeling resentful a 3 or greater and happy or proud less than 3. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for the four comparison groups, happy, angry,

proud, and resentful. We anticipated that significant effects would be difficult to detect because we did not create extreme differences in emotional states. Therefore, we interpreted effects to be statistically significant when their p-values reached .10 or less.

Happy compared to angry. Results of independent sample t-tests reveal that happy participants (M=3.49, SD=1.05) rated distributive justice higher than angry participants (M=2.59, SD=1.10, t(409)=3.11, p<.01); happy participants (M=3.45, SD=.70) rated procedural justice significantly higher than angry participants (M=3.04, SD=.74, t(410)=2.12, p<.05); and happy participants (M=4.23, SD=.75) rated interactional justice higher than angry participants (M=3.65, SD=1.00, t(409)=2.12, p<.10), thus supporting hypotheses 1a, b, and c.

Happy compared to resentful. Happy participants (M=3.49, SD=1.05) rated distributive justice higher than resentful participants (M=2.35, SD=.88, t(407)=3.67, p<.01); happy participants (M=3.45, SD=.70) rated procedural justice significantly higher than resentful participants (M=2.94, SD=.70, t(408)=2.45, p<.01); and happy participants (M=4.23, SD=.75) rated interactional justice higher than resentful participants (M=3.65, SD=1.00, t(407)=2.59, p<.05), thus supporting hypotheses 2a, b, and c.

Proud compared to angry. Results of independent sample t-tests reveal that participants who felt proud (M=3.51, SD=1.04) rated distributive justice higher than angry participants (M=2.59, SD=1.10, t(338)=3.23, p<.01); proud participants (M=3.46, SD=.70) rated procedural justice significantly higher than angry participants (M=3.04, SD=.73, t(339)=2.17, p<.05); and proud participants (M=4.22, SD=.79) rated interactional justice significantly higher than angry participants (M=3.65, SD=1.00, t(338)=2.61, p<.10), thus supporting hypotheses 3a, b, c.

Proud compared to resentful. Participants who felt proud (M=3.51, SD=1.04) rated distributive justice higher than participants feeling resentful (M=2.35, SD=.88, t(336)=3.79,

$p<.01$); proud participants ($M=3.46$, $SD=.70$) rated procedural justice significantly higher than resentful participants ($M=2.94$, $SD=.70$, $t(337)=2.50$, $p<.05$); and proud participants ($M=4.22$, $SD=.79$) rated interactional justice significantly higher than resentful participants ($M=3.65$, $SD=1.00$, $t(336)=2.44$, $p<.05$), thus supporting hypotheses 4a, b, and c.

Discussion

The purpose of our basic study was to take a first look at whether naturally occurring discrete emotions had an effect on perceptions of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. The results of this study show that individuals who rated feeling happy or proud tended to rate the three forms of fairness significantly higher than those who reported feeling angry or resentful. Although we cannot conclude from this one study that individuals who are in a negative mood will perceive a generally fair situation as unfair, our data do suggest that individuals' mood might serve as an evaluative lens through which fairness judgments are made. Future research might further test the extent to which this lens influences judgments (e.g., can individuals be so mad that they perceive even fair situations as unfair?), as well as whether or not generalized statements about the fairness of a situation can even be made (e.g., are there situations most people would interpret as fair or unfair?). Experimental research is needed to adequately test these sorts of questions.

We feel that the observed effect of discrete emotions on justice perceptions might be caused by a number of phenomena. First, as suggested by Clark and Fiske (1982) individuals in positive moods tend to retrieve information and memories that are positive. Therefore in reflecting back on the procedures, outcomes, and interpersonal treatment received in class, our happy students may have recalled only positive events upon which to base their judgments. Such an effect is consistent with other research showing that individuals reliably make mood-

congruent judgments (e.g., Mayer, 2001; Mayer et al., 1992). Second, individuals in a happy emotional state may only have replied based on their current emotional state and not given much consideration to the study at hand ((Bless et al., 1990; Schwarz, 1990; Schwarz et al., 1987). Since we did not assess level of involvement or attention to the task, we cannot tell if individuals were taking it seriously or not. Perhaps future research can tease this apart.

Although preliminary, the results of this basic study lead us to wonder if it might be possible to manipulate fairness perceptions by creating an artificially positive emotional climate and then present less than favorable decisions or procedures. In this scenario perhaps individuals may then perceive the procedures more favorably than they might have otherwise. Additional research is necessary to test this specific hypothesis. Given the results of Weiss et al. (1999) showing the effect of fairness and unfairness on discrete emotions, combined with our study findings, researchers might consider the possibility that fairness serves as an attenuator or amplifier. That is, perhaps fairness increases (amplifier) and/or decreases (attenuator) the input. In this manner, fair processes and treatment may alter the effects of pre-established emotions such as anger, thus resulting in a less upset angry emotion as an outcome.

We feel that a particularly important strength of this study comes from the fact that we examined naturally occurring (as opposed to induced) emotions. Since fairness research has shown that individuals form perceptions of justice about a situation or event (see Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001), we chose not to confound our study by presenting a situation that might artificially catalyze particular emotions. However, within this strength there is also weakness. That is, by not manipulating the situation, the lack of variance in emotion may have limited our ability to find strong effects. However, given that we had no control over the

situations participants may have encountered just prior to coming into the laboratory, we are unable to know if the observed emotional variance was an under- or over-estimate.

Despite these limitations, we believe that this first examination of whether emotions play a role in perceptions of justice is an important one. If anything, our results suggest that justice researchers should pay more attention to the antecedents of organizational justice. Justice researchers have thoroughly and consistently demonstrated the robust effects that fairness perceptions have on key organizational behaviors and attitudes; it is time to more broadly consider the effect that emotions, personality, or other constructs may have on the formation of fairness perceptions themselves.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Intercorrelations Among Variables, and Reliability Estimates (N=504)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Happy	3.60	.82	--						
2 Proud	3.00	1.07	.42**	--					
3 Angry	1.54	.77	-.44**	-.10*	--				
4 Resentful	1.56	.91	-.31**	-.09	.43**	--			
5 Procedural Justice	3.43	.70	.00	.08	-.08	-.08	(.75)		
6 Interactional Justice	4.20	.77	.06	.06	-.10*	-.14**	.54**	(.91)	
7 Distributive Justice	3.46	1.04	.06	.10*	-.10*	-.09*	.38**	.38**	(.87)

Note. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; alpha reliability coefficients shown on diagonal.

Table 2

Means And Standard Deviations for Participants Feeling Happy, Proud, Angry, and Resentful

	Positive Emotions				Negative Emotions			
	Happy (N = 397)		Proud (N = 326)		Angry (N =14)		Resentful (N = 12)	
Dependent Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Distributive Justice	3.48	1.05	3.51	1.04	2.59	1.10	2.35	.89
Procedural Justice	3.44	.70	3.46	.70	3.04	.74	2.94	.70
Interactional Justice	4.23	.75	4.22	.79	3.65	1.00	3.65	1.00