Applicant reactions to selection events: interactive effects of fairness, feedback and attributions
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CHAPTER ONE
APPLICANT REACTIONS TO SELECTION: AN INTRODUCTION

Since the late eighties of the last century, the employment landscape has undergone tremendous change. Labor markets in many western countries have experienced a surge in job mobility (Moscarini & Thomsson, 2007): a shift from lifelong employment to lifetime job search and career growth has taken place (Burns, 2006). Given that in western economies the estimated average number of jobs an individual holds over a lifetime nowadays is at least about ten to twelve (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008; Giaccone & Colleoni, 2009), it is clear that people participate in selection procedures and receive selection outcomes more often than ever before. Because the number of applications most often exceeds the number of positive hiring decisions, messages containing rejection decisions abound.

This trend highly justifies the growing research interest in the psychological impact of selection events on job applicants (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). Failing to consider this impact, especially following rejection, can severely harm applicants’ reactions, such as well-being, self- and organizational perceptions, and attitudes toward test-taking. These reactions may further influence all kinds of behaviors, such as career withdrawal, negative recommendations of the organization and ceasing to purchase its products or services. Indeed, recent survey research by international talent assessment bureau SHL demonstrated that in the UK half of all job seekers were left with a negative impression of an organization following an unsuccessful job application, and that a fifth had stopped buying its products as a result (Stevens, 2010).

Despite the growing body of literature on the effects of selection events on applicant reactions, however, many questions remain to be answered. For instance, how do reactions of applicants differ for hiring versus rejection outcomes? Are personal and organizational applicant reactions affected differently by selection events? Could the relationship between a selection outcome and applicants’ reactions be influenced by other situational and dispositional factors? And if so, what role do differences in applicants’ perceptions, experiences and dispositions play? These and other questions will be addressed in the four empirical chapters of
this dissertation. The purpose of the current chapter is twofold. The first objective is to provide a concise history and review of the existing literature concerning applicant reactions, and to address some inconsistent results in this domain. Where possible, a distinction will be made between applicant reactions relating to personal outcomes (e.g., well-being, self-evaluations) versus organizational outcomes (e.g., organizational attractiveness). The second goal of this chapter is to depict several situational and dispositional factors that may influence the relationship between selection events and applicant reactions and that potentially cause the inconsistency in results.

**Applicant Reactions Research: A Concise History**

Traditionally, the agenda in selection research was dominated by concerns over validity and utility of selection techniques (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). In the late eighties and early nineties of the last century, in response to labor market changes and technological, ethical and legal forces, researchers started to develop an interest in the impact selection events may have on applicants (Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004). Due to tight labor markets (i.e., low unemployment rates), organizations had to compete to attract new personnel. This need for competition encouraged organizations to reflect on how their image could be affected by the various components of their recruitment process (Nassar, 1999). Further, during these years, the workforce became increasingly diverse: more women and minority group members entered the labor market (Cox, 1993). This spurred organizational decision makers’ interest in their organization’s attractiveness among hitherto unknown but plausibly valuable employees, and the possibility of adverse impact of their selection procedures (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000).

Consequently, several theoretical articles were published that urged researchers to pay more attention to applicants’ reactions to selection events (e.g., Herriot, 1989; Rynes, 1991, 1993; Schuler, 1993). In these articles, researchers and practitioners were warned that selection involves not one, but two parties. Of course, it is the organization that selects one or several employees from a larger pool of applicants. It should not be forgotten, however, that applicants also select: they choose the organization with which they will apply, and whether they will work there if hired (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). This early research on applicant
reactions was of a fairly social psychological character, and shared a focus on understanding of underlying processes. Consecutive research, however, focused more on examining effects of fairness perceptions, and consequently moved further away from the basic psychological toward more organizational justice work (Ployhart & Harold, 2004). Various researchers have since developed theoretical models and many have conducted empirical studies of applicants’ reactions to selection events (e.g., Bauer et al., 2001; Chan, Schmitt, DeShon, Clause, & Delbridge, 1997; Gilliland, 1994; Ployhart, Ryan, & Bennett, 1999; Truxillo, Bauer, & Sanchez, 2001).

Within the applicant reactions literature, two major streams of applicant reactions research can be distinguished, the first focusing on issues with regard to fairness of selection methods and outcomes, the second focusing on applicants’ attitudes toward selection tests (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). The first research stream arose when researchers in the field of organizational justice started to explore the possibilities of integrating justice theories into applicant reactions research. Gilliland (1993) first developed a model in which components of selection processes are postulated to influence applicants’ perceptions of the fairness of these processes. Consistent with Organizational Justice Theory (Greenberg, 1990), these fairness perceptions are in turn proposed to influence people’s cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral reactions. In the same period, two other justice-oriented articles were published. First, Arvey and Sackett (1993) likewise posited a theory of factors possibly influencing applicants’ fairness perceptions, composed of somewhat different components than the Gilliland Selection Fairness model. Second, Smither, Reilly, Millsap, Pearlman, and Stoffey (1993) regarded job-relatedness of selection procedures, which is also the most important rule in Gilliland’s model, as the focal point of interest. They distinguish two subcomponents of job-relatedness: face validity (i.e., the extent to which a test seems valid at face value) and perceived predictive validity (i.e., the extent to which a test in reality predicts what it should predict in theory).

A second stream of applicant reactions research, initiated by Arvey, Strickland, Drauden, and Martin (1990), primarily concerns individuals’ attitudes toward taking selection tests. The main focus in this research is on the influence of test-taking attitudes on test performance, and on the possibility of reducing racial
differences in test performance. This work has led to numerous studies that further examine questions of test-taker perceptions and individual differences in test performance (e.g., Chan et al., 1997; Chan, Schmitt, Sacco, & DeShon, 1998b). Note that the fairness research is focused more on applicants’ perceptions of procedures and decisions, whilst the test-attitude research is focused more on applicant’s perceptions of their own cognitions and behaviors while participating in those procedures and receiving a decision (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). The main focus of the present dissertation is on the first research area - fairness perceptions, whilst in one empirical chapter, the two streams of research will be combined.

In the next section, possible determinants of applicant reactions will be discussed. These are: selection outcomes (e.g., being hired or rejected), selection fairness (procedural and distributive), selection feedback, and applicants’ attributional style.

**Determinants of Applicant Reactions**

*Selection Outcomes*

The most often investigated factor of applicant reactions is the outcome of the selection procedure itself. That is, regardless of which selection method is used (e.g., interview, cognitive ability test, assessment center), being hired or rejected is generally regarded as having a major impact on applicants’ reactions (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). Intuitively, one would assume that being hired leads to more favorable applicant reactions than being rejected (Lounsbury, Bobrow, & Jensen, 1989). However, previous research investigating relationships between selection outcomes and various personal and organizational applicant reactions has rendered inconsistent results.

Several studies have indeed demonstrated favorable personal reactions after a positive as compared to a negative selection outcome. For example, self-esteem, self-efficacy (Ployhart & Ryan, 1997; Schroth & Shah, 2000), and test-taking self-efficacy (Truxillo, Bauer, Campion, & Paronto, 2002; Truxillo et al., 2001-Study 1) have all been found to be higher for hired than for rejected individuals. Further, hired people generally report higher expectations of future success (Ployhart & Ryan, 1997) and performance (Ployhart & Ryan, 1998; Ployhart et al., 1999), and better mood at work (Fletcher, 1991) than people who are rejected. In contrast,
however, in other studies, a relationship between selection outcomes and personal reactions was not found. That is, in these studies, self-efficacy (Gilliland, 1994), test-taking self-efficacy (Bauer, Maertz, Dolen, & Campion, 1998; Truxillo et al., 2001-Study 2), and self-esteem at work (Fletcher, 1991) were the same for hired and rejected individuals.

Differences in reactions toward the recruiting organization between hired and rejected applicants have also been found. For instance, perceptions of the attractiveness of the organization (Bauer et al., 1998; Kluger & Rothstein, 1993; Ployhart et al., 1999), intentions to recommend the organization to other applicants (Bauer et al., 1998), and work ethics (Fletcher, 1991) all appeared to be higher for individuals who received a positive rather than a negative selection outcome. However, these relationships were not found in other applicant reactions studies. That is, no differences between hired and rejected applicants were found for organizational attractiveness (Truxillo et al., 2002), recommendation intentions (Gilliland, 1994; Ployhart & Ryan, 1998; Truxillo et al., 2002), reapplication intentions (Ployhart & Ryan, 1997; Truxillo et al., 2002) and organizational commitment (Fletcher, 1991). In addition, in one study, hired individuals were even demonstrated to report lower recommendation intentions than rejected ones (Ployhart & Ryan, 1997).

The inconsistencies in these findings may of course be due to differences in the reactions (e.g., personal or organizational) or selection methods (e.g., interview, test) studied, or the study context (e.g., authentic versus hypothetical). However, the strength and direction of the relationship between the selection outcome and applicants’ reactions may also be contingent on other factors, such as applicants’ perceptions, experiences, and dispositions. Indeed, applicant reactions research has typically focused on direct relationships between selection events and perceptions, attitudes, and intentions. Yet, it is very likely that these relationships are moderated by other factors (Gilliland, 1993; Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). First, applicants may differ in the perceptions they have of the fairness of selection events (e.g., procedures, outcomes). Hence, a positive selection outcome may only lead to favorable reactions if the applicant regards this outcome as fair. For instance, a hired applicant who feels this decision is unfair, may be unsatisfied with the outcome, and perceive the job and the organization as less attractive. When
rejected, individuals who perceive this outcome as unfair may feel more anger toward the organization, and may perceive it as less attractive than those who perceive their rejection as fair. Similarly, applicants may have different perceptions of the fairness of the selection procedure, which may cause, for example, negative reactions following a positive selection decision that seems based on unfair procedures.

Second, applicants may differ in the experiences they have with selection events. An important difference in experiences is the kind of feedback applicants receive about selection procedures and outcomes. For instance, large variations exist in feedback content, such as explanations for using a certain selection procedure, or the provision of test scores along with a selection decision. Not only the content, but also the amount and specificity of the feedback, may highly vary over selection situations (Ployhart et al., 1999). These feedback features may strengthen or weaken the relationship between selection events and applicant reactions, and even alter its direction. For example, one study showed that feedback about test performance can result in lower work ethics, job involvement and mood at work (Fletcher, 1991). Yet, little is known about the precise influence of the various feedback features. For instance, do applicants respond less negatively to a rejection if they are provided with their specific test performance scores?

Third, dispositional differences exist between applicants. One important difference in applicants’ dispositions is their tendency to make certain attributions for their selection experiences (Ployhart & Harold, 2004; Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). For example, an applicant may attribute a rejection to internal factors, such as low capacities or low effort, or to external factors, such as a biased selection committee or distraction during a selection test. An applicants’ attributional style, the relatively stable tendency of ascribing experiences to certain causes, may greatly influence his or her reactions to these experiences. To date, no research has investigated how applicant attributional styles might affect their reactions to selection events.

It should be noted that, to organizations, it may seem most important to study the reactions of the people they hire, and who thus become their employees. However, given that rejection decisions can severely harm not only people’s
personal reactions, but also their reactions toward the organization, the reactions of the applicants they do not hire should matter to organizations just as well (Gilliland, 1993). Because most selection procedures entail at best a few rejections, especially in times of wide labor markets, there is a clear need for more research on the impact of negative selection decisions.

In sum, research on applicants’ reactions to selection outcomes has provided some seemingly inconsistent results. This may stem from the fact that thorough examinations of the (interactive) influence of applicants’ perceptions, experiences and dispositions on their reactions to selection events, as mentioned above, is still lacking. In the next sections, therefore, the potential influence of perceived selection fairness, feedback and applicant attributional processing will be further discussed.

Selection Fairness

Of the various justice-based models, Gilliland’s (1993) Selection Fairness Theory became dominant in the applicant reactions literature. In the model, it is proposed that situational features influence applicants’ perceptions of the fairness of selection procedures and outcomes. Examples of such features are the type of selection test used, the information that is provided about the selection procedure, or the behavior of recruiting personnel. Fairness perceptions are in turn expected to impinge upon applicants’ reactions during participation in a selection procedure as well as after receiving the selection outcome. Reactions that may occur during participation, for instance, are altered motivation to take selection tests, and intentions to accept the job if offered or to withdraw from the procedure. Reactions that may occur after reception of the outcome are adapted job satisfaction and work performance, intentions to leave (for selected individuals), and litigation intentions (for rejected individuals). Finally, in both stages, fairness may affect such diverse reactions as applicants’ self-esteem, well-being, test-taking attitudes, organizational attractiveness, recommendation and purchase intentions (Gilliland, 1993). Since its development, selection fairness theory has served as a basis for numerous applicant reactions studies (e.g., Bauer et al., 2001; Gilliland, 1994; Ployhart & Ryan, 1997; Ployhart et al., 1999; Schmitt & Gilliland, 1992). Generally, this research differentiates between aspects relating to selection procedures,
referred to as procedural fairness, and those relating to selection outcomes, termed distributive fairness. In the next paragraphs, procedural and distributive selection fairness will first be further explained separately, after which differences and possible relationships between the two constructs will be discussed.

**Procedural Fairness**

The procedural component of selection fairness theory is composed of a set of rules. All ten rules relate to one of the three procedural parts of the model: formal characteristics, explanations, or interpersonal treatment (Gilliland, 1993). *Formal characteristics* refer to all kinds of features of the actual selection procedure. An example is job-relatedness: the extent to which applicants perceive a selection test to measure capacities that are relevant to the job they applied for. Most applicants prefer procedures that they perceive to be job-related over apparently unrelated tests (e.g., Bauer et al., 1998; Ployhart & Ryan, 1998; Rynes, 1993; Rynes & Connerley, 1993; Steiner & Gilliland, 1996). The perceived job-relatedness of a selection instrument is generally regarded as the most influential procedural fairness rule in determining applicants’ reactions. The other formal characteristics rules are the degree to which an applicant perceives to get opportunities for demonstrating his or her capacities, and the degree to which test performance seems to be measured and registered consistently over all applicants. The *explanation* component of procedural fairness pertains to perceptions of the information people receive about the selection procedure and outcome. For instance, some applicants may find that they are well-informed about the selection procedure and the tests used, whereas others may feel the need for more information. Likewise, applicants may differ in the detail to which they would like to receive information about their test performance. Third, the *interpersonal treatment* component refers to the way in which people feel treated during and after participating in a selection procedure. An example is the extent to which an applicant perceives to have had the opportunity to ask questions during an interview (Gilliland, 1993).

Gilliland (1993) expected a positive relationship between procedural fairness and applicant reactions. Procedural fairness evaluations have indeed been demonstrated to positively affect several personal outcomes, both during and after participation in a selection procedure. For instance, positive relationships between
procedural fairness perceptions and test-taking self-efficacy have been shown (e.g., Bauer et al., 1998; Truxillo et al., 2001; 2002). However, in other studies, no relationships between procedural fairness and self-perceptions were found (Gilliland, 1994; Ployhart & Ryan, 1997). Further, several studies have indeed found positive relationships between procedural fairness and reactions toward the organization, such as organizational attractiveness, job acceptance and recommendation intentions (Bauer et al., 1998; 2001; Bauer, Truxillo, Paronto, Campion, & Weekley, 2004; Gilliland, 1994; Ployhart & Ryan, 1997; 1998; Truxillo et al., 2002).

**Distributive Fairness**

The distributive component of the selection fairness model pertains to perceptions of the distribution of selection outcomes over applicants (Gilliland, 1993). Distributive fairness perceptions are based on three organizational justice rules: equity, equality and need (Greenberg, 1990). In a selection context, the equity rule refers to the extent to which applicants think their inputs (e.g., qualifications, experience, background) justify a certain selection outcome (Adams, 1965). For instance, a negative selection outcome may be perceived as unfair if an applicant thinks his or her qualifications meet or even exceed the requirements of the job. Likewise, a positive selection outcome may be perceived as unfair if an applicant regards his or her qualifications as insufficient. Because individuals generally tend to focus more on negative than on positive information (Greenberg, 1986), perception of inequity is often assumed to be more likely upon receiving negative than positive outcomes. However, perceived inequity that is due to an allegedly unjust positive selection outcome (acceptance decision) may greatly affect reactions as well. Next, the equality rule in selection entails that all applicants should have equal chances of receiving a certain outcome. In other words, the selection outcome should depend on relevant inputs only, and should not be affected by factors such as gender or ethnic background. Finally, the need rule states that certain applicants should be treated preferentially, mainly for humanitarian reasons. For instance, based on this rule, if two applicants for the same job have similar qualifications, the one with a disability should be selected (Gilliland, 1993).

Organizational justice studies have demonstrated that equity is the dominant distributive rule (Gilliland, 1993). It is generally assumed that a lack of
equity renders negative emotions, in turn leading to cognitive and behavioral attempts to restore equity (Adams, 1965). In a selection situation, an applicant who feels unjustly rejected may for example be unsatisfied with the outcome and feel anger toward the organization. He or she may try to restore equity, for instance by devaluing the job and the organization, negatively recommending the organization to others or ceasing the purchase of its products or services. An applicant who feels unjustly hired by an organization may likewise be unsatisfied with the outcome, but rather feel guilty. In order to restore equity, he or she may increase job performance and adapt self-perceptions upward (Gilliland, 1993).

Despite their clear importance, investigations of the relationship between distributive fairness and applicant reactions are rare. In a few studies, distributive fairness positively related to applicants’ reactions toward the organization. That is, perceiving the outcome as fair rather than unfair was found to lead to higher organizational attractiveness, job acceptance, recommendation and reapplication intentions (Gilliland, 1994; Ployhart & Ryan, 1997; 1998). To our knowledge, sparse studies have investigated effects of distributive fairness on personal reactions, and none of these found significant relationships. For instance, self-esteem, (job performance) self-efficacy, and self-evaluations all appeared to be unaffected by perceptions of distributive fairness (Gilliland, 1994; Ployhart & Ryan, 1997).

Procedural and Distributive Fairness Combined

Procedural and distributive fairness are assumed to be two distinct constructs (Gilliland, 1993; Ployhart & Ryan, 1998), despite the fact that they are related both conceptually (Gilliland, 1993; Greenberg, 1990) and empirically (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; Hausknecht et al., 2004). In line with this distinction, a meta-analysis of organizational justice studies posited that interactions between the two constructs may occur, in two different ways (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996). First, when an outcome is negative or perceived as unfair (as compared to positive or fair), procedural fairness may have a more positive effect on reactions. Second, when procedural fairness is relatively low, the outcome or perceived fairness of the outcome may have a stronger effect on reactions. (Note that the actual selection outcome and the perceived fairness of that outcome (i.e., distributive fairness) in these propositions are considered to be similar, and thus as having similar effects). Several applicant reactions researchers have investigated
these organizational justice propositions. These studies confirmed that some interactions between procedural fairness and outcomes also occur in selection contexts, but that these may follow different patterns than interactions found in organizational justice studies. It was found, for instance, that for applicants who received a positive selection outcome (i.e., were accepted for a job), fair procedures led to higher self-perceptions than unfair procedures (Ployhart & Ryan, 1997; Schroth & Shah, 2000). However, upon receiving a rejection decision, procedural fairness was not found to affect applicants’ organizational attractiveness and recommendations intentions (Gilliland, 1994; Ployhart & Ryan, 1998). Results of several other applicant reactions studies also contradicted the organizational justice propositions. In contrast to the proposed positive effect of procedural fairness after a negative selection outcome, for example, fair procedures were found to lead to lower self-perceptions than unfair procedures (Gilliland, 1994; Ployhart & Ryan, 1997; Schroth & Shah, 2000).

These contradicting findings may partly be due to the types of outcomes that were examined (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000; Schroth & Shah, 2000): procedural fairness in selection seems to affect personal outcomes differently than organizational outcomes. For example, if an applicant is rejected but regards the procedure as fair, self-perceptions may be damaged, whilst organizational perceptions may increase. Another explanation for these differential findings may be that a selection context differs from other fields of organizational justice. As Ryan and Ployhart (2000) suggested, basic social justice theory would predict different effects in a selection context than in other organizational justice areas, because of the nature of the applicant - organization relationship. That is, organizational justice studies mostly concern people who are internal to an organization (i.e., employees) rather than external (i.e., applicants): essential differences seem to exist in the relationships these two groups have with an organization. First, the relationship between applicant and hiring organization generally is much shorter than that between incumbent and employing organization. Further, an application context often is of a more evaluative nature than an employment context. Finally, the application context oftentimes is more asymmetrical than the employment context: an organization often has more opportunity to estimate the value of an applicant and more alternatives to choose from than an applicant does, resulting in an
asymmetrical power division (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). Therefore, interaction patterns in applicant reactions areas may differ from those in organizational justice areas. In sum, more insight is needed into potential interactive effects of selection events and perceived fairness on applicant reactions.

Up to date, most applicant reactions researchers have focused on effects of procedural rather than distributive fairness (Hausknecht et al., 2004). A reason for this may be that organizational justice studies (i.e., in the workplace) often find that perceived procedural fairness accounts for more variance in individuals’ reactions than perceived distributive fairness (e.g., Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Because of the evaluative and asymmetrical nature, however, the fairness of a selection outcome may be just as or even more important to an applicant than the fairness of a procedure (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; Gilliland, 1993; Ployhart & Ryan, 1997). Thus, the effects of both procedural and distributive fairness perceptions on reactions of applicants should be studied (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000).

It is important to note here that effects of distributive fairness perceptions may be different from those of the actual selection outcome (Ployhart & Ryan, 1997). Therefore, in this dissertation potential interactive effects of selection outcomes with both procedural and distributive fairness on applicant reactions are examined. Finally, although investigating the impact of fairness perceptions on applicant reactions is important, other factors may be influential as well (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). To get a more elaborate picture of how applicant reactions are formed, in the present dissertation, two other factors are considered as possible influences: performance feedback and attributional style.

**Feedback**

The actual selection decision seems to be the most salient outcome of a selection process, yet the explanation that is given about this decision may affect applicants at least as much (Gilliland, 1993). Feedback in general can be defined as a given response to an action or situation (Roebuck, 1996). It may entail two functions, namely that of providing information on the particular situation a person is in (informative component), and that of regulating a person’s behavior by encouraging or discouraging it (motivational component) (Oudenhoven, 1999). Selection feedback may comprise situational information, such as an explanation of
an organization’s diversity policy in selecting personnel, why a certain selection method is used, or an explanation about the particular selection outcome (e.g., Horvath, Ryan, & Stierwalt, 2000). It may also contain more personal information, such as feedback about an applicant’s performance on a selection procedure. Personal messages may range from a mere statement about the impression an applicant made during an interview to very specific scores of test performance or an assessment report. A final feature of selection feedback is the sensitivity with which it is provided by the organization (Ployhart et al., 1999; Horvath et al., 2000).

It is generally assumed that providing applicants with information about selection procedures and decisions is desirable. Accordingly, professional ethical standards in many western countries state that organizations should provide their applicants with selection information that is as detailed as possible (Bartram, 2001). Especially after receiving a negative selection outcome, the provision of information may temper unfavorable applicant responses (Gilliland, 1993). For example, a rejection message including information on the high number of rejected applicants may render a more positive reaction than a message merely providing a negative decision. In addition, feedback about substandard test performance may lead rejected applicants to feel less negative about the test (e.g., Lounsbury et al., 1989), and enable them to develop more accurate self-perceptions and career goals (e.g., Robertson & Smith, 1989). However, the assumption that selection feedback generally renders positive results seems to lack an empirical base. Up to today, this assumption has received insufficient attention by applicant reactions researchers, and thus requires more prudence. Importantly, an extensive meta-analysis of feedback studies in a variety of research fields demonstrated that feedback has highly variable instead of merely favorable effects (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). In line with these meta-analytic findings and with the literature on social accounts (Bies, 1987), a few applicant reactions studies have shown that responses to selection feedback are not always as positive as is often assumed (e.g., Anseel & Lievens, 2006; Bauer et al., 1998).

Further, as mentioned above, feedback may influence the relationship between selection outcome and applicant reactions. For example, an applicant who is rejected may feel anger toward the organization and consequently lower his or her perceptions of the organization’s attractiveness as employer. The organization
may, however, try to temper the applicant’s anger and the decrease in attractiveness perceptions by providing an explanation of why the particular procedure was used or by providing feedback about performance on a test. In line with these assumptions, Ployhart et al. (1999) found interactions between selection outcomes and several types of feedback on applicants’ reactions, but with different interaction patterns. Self-perceptions of allegedly hired participants were enhanced by information about the procedure and by personal information (i.e., specific test scores), whereas rejected participants’ self-perceptions were damaged by personal information. In contrast, organizational perceptions were enhanced by providing personal or procedural information. These different study findings raise some interesting research questions. For instance, is providing applicants with feedback as advantageous as is often assumed? Could feedback differentially affect personal (e.g., self-perceptions, well-being) versus non-personal (e.g., organizational perceptions, intentions) reactions? Do reactions differ depending on the specificity of the feedback? Hence, in the present dissertation, the effects of feedback that applicants receive about their performance on a test will receive more research attention.

It should be noted that in the applicant reactions literature, the terms feedback and selection outcome are sometimes used interchangeably. That is, the term feedback sometimes refers to the actual selection outcome (decision) rather than the information about a selection event (i.e., pertaining to the procedure or outcome) (e.g., Fletcher, 1991). Finally, the applicant reactions literature also seems to lack consensus over the relationship between feedback and fairness in selection. In Gilliland’s (1993) selection fairness model, feedback is considered to be a component of selection methods, and therefore one of the procedural fairness rules. Other conceptual and empirical studies treat selection feedback and fairness as separate entities (e.g., Fletcher, 1991; Iles & Robertson, 1997; Ployhart, Ehrhart, & Hayes, 2005; Ployhart et al., 1999; Robertson & Smith, 1989). In this dissertation, selection fairness and feedback will be regarded as two separate entities, and feedback will refer to information about performance on a test, not to the selection outcome.
Attributional Style

Despite the impressive growth of applicant reactions studies over the last decade (Hausknecht et al., 2004), little is yet known about individual differences in psychological processing that may precede applicant reactions (Chan & Schmitt, 2004; Ployhart & Harold, 2004; Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). One theory that seems particularly apt to clarify differential psychological processing is Attribution Theory. Scientific research into attributions started with Lewin (1935), and was followed up by Heider (1958), who further laid the groundwork for modern attribution theory as developed by Weiner (1985; 1986). In this theory, it is postulated that people have a pervasive tendency to engage in attributional processing to understand the causes of their experiences. For instance, in any given situation, people may wonder “Why did this happen to me, and not to others?”, and “Will the same thing happen every time, or is this just an incident?” Applied to a selection context, an applicant may question: “Why did the organization not hire me?”, “How come I did not pass the cognitive ability test?”, or “Could I receive a job offer the next time I apply for a job?” According to attribution theory, the perception of the actual event is then contrasted to the expectation someone had before it occurred, and as a result the attribution is made. This attribution in turn influences people’s cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral reactions.

A focal point of attribution theory is that the particular type of cause attributed to an event is less important than its latent dimensionality. Three distinct attributional dimensions are identified in the theory: locus, stability and controllability. Locus concerns the extent to which an individual perceives the occurrence of a certain event to be caused by internal or by external factors. For example, an applicant may attribute a rejection for a job to an internal factor, such as his or her own substandard performance on a test. Alternatively, he or she may perceive the rejection to be caused by an external factor, such as a biased test or incompetent selection committee. Stability pertains to the extent to which the cause is seen as stable over time. That is, the applicant could perceive the rejection to be due to a lack of preparation (unstable factor), or to a lack of ability (stable factor). Finally, controllability refers to the amount of control the individual perceives to have over the outcome: the rejection could have been due to a very large number of applicants (uncontrollable), or to an unappealing resume (controllable). Of these
three dimensions, locus is presumed to be the most influential on people’s reactions (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Weiner, 1985; 1986).

Attribution theory has been applied to a diversity of organizational domains (Martinko, 1995). This research has shown that making optimistic attributions – that is, more internal and stable attributions for positive events and external and unstable attributions for negative events – positively affects job satisfaction, performance and success at work (Proudfoot, Corr, Guest, & Gray, 2001). The theory seems highly applicable to selection contexts as well (Ployhart & Harold, 2004). One reason is that it was designed to understand people’s attributions in achievement-oriented, competitive environments, which is the very nature of selection situations. Moreover, research has shown that attributional processing is most plausibly triggered when an event is important, unexpected or negative (Weiner, 1985; Wong & Weiner, 1981). Because selection events are highly important to most job applicants, and unexpected or negative to many, they are very likely to elicit attributional processing (Ployhart & Ryan, 1997).

With the purpose of integrating attribution theory further into applicant reactions research, Ployhart and Harold (2004) developed the Applicant Attribution Reaction Theory (AART). AART is partly based on attribution theory (Weiner, 1985; 1986), and accordingly proposes that applicants’ cognitive, affective and behavioral reactions to any selection event are induced by attributional processing. The focal principle of AART is that objective selection events (e.g., selection outcome, selection feedback) only influence reactions through the attributions applicants make for these events. A few studies have indeed shown that attributions influence the formation of applicant reactions (e.g., Ployhart et al., 2005; Ployhart & Ryan, 1997). For example, internal attributions of successful performance were found to significantly relate to applicants’ test-taking attitude and willingness to prepare for subsequent tests (Arvey et al., 1990).

Importantly, it has been found that people tend to attribute their experiences to causes in a fairly consistent manner, and that individual differences exist in these attributional tendencies (e.g., Abramson et al., 1978; Seligman, Abramson, Semmel, & Von Baeyer, 1979). That is, one individual may perceive various positive experiences to be due to internal factors (e.g., capability, effort), whereas another may perceive the same experiences to be caused by external factors (e.g.,
This idiosyncratic way of attributing, generally referred to as attributional style, influences people’s cognitive, affective and motivational reactions to their experiences (e.g., Alloy, Hartlage, & Abramson, 1988). It may be assumed that an applicant’s attributional style influences his or her reactions to selection events. When rejected, for instance, a usually optimistically attributing individual may show higher well-being than a less optimistic person. Further, for more optimistic people a negative selection outcome that is perceived as unfair might facilitate its attribution to an external cause. That is, particularly people with an optimistic attributional style may more easily blame the organization for their rejection, and this may especially be the case if the rejection is perceived as unfair.

In sum, attributional processing may prove highly valuable in explaining differences in applicants’ reactions. Yet, a lack of research into attributional processing in the applicant reactions domain exists. In the present dissertation an attempt is made to fill this void by examining the formation of applicant reactions from an attributional perspective.

**Applicant Reactions**

As noted above, it is important to differentiate between personal reactions and reactions toward the recruiting organization, and to examine these reactions simultaneously. Further, it is important to realize that applicant reactions likely are more influenced by perceptions formed after reception of a selection outcome than by pre-outcome perceptions. Many studies have measured reactions immediately after the selection process, but before applicants have received the selection outcome. Because these studies can be criticized to paint an incomplete picture (Bauer et al., 1998; 2004; Ryan & Ployhart, 2000), the focus of the present study was on applicants’ post-outcome reactions, specifically on their well-being, test-taking attitudes, and organizational perceptions.

**Well-being**

Affective well-being concerns the way people feel about themselves and the settings in which they live and work. It is a subjective estimate of the quality of life (Warr, 1990), on a relatively short-term basis (e.g., Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000; Ryff, 1989). Research has demonstrated affective well-being to
positively influence numerous variables, such as general health, economic and career success, work satisfaction and self-confidence (Diener & Ryan, 2009). Well-being itself may in turn be altered by events such as employment status, financial situation, and social relationships and position (Diener & Ryan, 2009; Warr, Butcher, Robertson, & Callinan, 2004). Further, fulfillment of basic needs like autonomy, competence, and relatedness, has been found to increase well-being (Reis et al., 2000). As such, selection outcomes and fairness perceptions typically are events that may cause changes in affective well-being. To our knowledge, however, no studies of the influence of selection events on affective well-being exist. Therefore, the present dissertation focuses on the impact of fairness, feedback and attributions on applicant well-being following selection outcomes.

Test-Taking Attitude

Another variable that deserves more research attention is applicants’ attitudes toward taking selection tests. A favorable attitude toward test-taking has been found to be positively related to test performance (e.g., Arvey et al., 1990; Chan et al., 1997; Sanchez, Truxillo, & Bauer, 2000; Schmit & Ryan, 1992). As such, a decrease in test-taking attitude could impede an applicant’s future test performances, thereby lowering his or her chances of getting a job. Further, differences in test-taking attitude have been demonstrated to explain differential ethnic test performance (e.g., Chan et al., 1997; Ployhart, Ziegert, & McFarland, 2003) and may affect the validity of a selection test (Ployhart & Ehrhart, 2002; Schmit & Ryan, 1992). Improving people’s attitudes toward selection testing may thus reduce adverse impact and increase selection test validity. Despite its obvious importance, however, no research that we know of has focused on the relationship between selection fairness, feedback and attributions on the one hand, and individuals’ test-taking attitudes on the other. Because more insight into the (interactive) influence of these factors on applicant test-taking attitudes may prove greatly valuable, especially in case of a rejection, the present dissertation investigated these effects simultaneously.
Organizational Perceptions

A final variable that is worth studying is the attractiveness of an organization as perceived by the applicant, concerning perceptions of the extent to which an organization is appealing as employer or as supplier of products or services (Hausknecht et al., 2004). Organizational attractiveness has been demonstrated to have strong links with applicant intentions toward the organization, such as intentions to apply for a job, accept a job offer, and purchase products or services (Macan, Avedon, Paese, & Smith, 1994; Rafaeli, 1999; Stevens, 2010; Truxillo et al., 2002); intentions to reapply with the organization and recommend it to other applicants (e.g., Ployhart & Ryan, 1998; Smither et al., 1993); and even intentions to litigate against the organization after rejection (e.g., Bauer et al., 2001). A few researchers have shown that organizational attractiveness in turn may be influenced by perceptions of procedural and distributive fairness (e.g., Ryan, Sacco, McFarland, & Kriska, 2000), explanations for selection decisions (e.g., Ployhart et al., 1999), or word-of-mouth (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2005).

In formulating selection fairness theory, Gilliland (1993) presumed that interactive effects could exist for selection outcomes and perceived fairness on organizational reactions. However, sparse applicant reactions studies have investigated whether the effect of a selection outcome on reactions toward the organization could be contingent on fairness, and these have rendered inconsistent results. Further, up to date, no studies that we know of have examined interactive effects of fairness, feedback and applicant attributional styles. Because besides fairness perceptions, selection feedback and attributional processing may be highly influential in determining applicants’ reactions toward an organization, the present dissertation focuses on the potential impact of these factors on organizational attractiveness.
Overview of the Present Dissertation

In the following chapters, five empirical studies of applicant reactions will be reported. Selection outcome effects on applicants in actual selection situations are largely under-researched, limiting the external validity of this research.

In Chapter 2 of this dissertation we aim to fill this void by examining the impact of positive versus negative selection outcomes on well-being and organizational attractiveness perceptions of actual applicants. Additionally, the question whether the impact of an acceptance or rejection decision is potentially moderated by an applicant’s procedural and distributive fairness perceptions is investigated. Chapter 3 zooms in on some of the findings of the second chapter by more closely examining reactions of rejected applicants. In this chapter, a laboratory study into the interactive effects of selection feedback and fairness on rejected applicants’ well-being and self-evaluations will be described. In Chapter 4, two experimental studies are reported, one conducted in a laboratory, the other online, in which the interactive effects of feedback and fairness on rejected applicants’ well-being and organizational attractiveness are further examined from an attributional approach. Chapter 5 partly extends the findings on interactive effects of feedback and fairness on applicant reactions, by experimentally manipulating feedback specificity. In this chapter, the interactive effects of feedback, fairness and attributional processing on applicants’ test-taking attitude are reported. Further, the findings of the empirical studies in this dissertation will be summarized and integrated in Chapter 6. Finally, the contributions and limitations of the different studies will be discussed, and implications for research and practice will be presented.

1 Please note that in order to optimize the “stand-alone” clarity and comprehension of each empirical chapter in this dissertation, these chapters were set up independently. As a consequence, overlap exists in terms of introductions and discussions between the chapters.