Applicant reactions to selection events: interactive effects of fairness, feedback and attributions
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CHAPTER SIX
GENERAL DISCUSSION

Due to a surge in job mobility, the impact of selection events over the last decades is increasingly being investigated from the applicant’s perspective. As a result, studies of applicant reactions to all kinds of selection methods and decisions have amounted. However, as argued in Chapter 1, many studies have found inconsistencies in the selection event – applicant reactions relationships, and a gap still seems to exist in the current knowledge of factors that may influence these relationships. Moreover, research attention has almost exclusively been directed at effects of the fairness of selection procedures and outcomes. The research presented in this dissertation was developed to examine the influence of several situational and dispositional factors that potentially play a role in the formation of applicant reactions. Specifically, the (interactive) influences of fairness, feedback and applicant attributional tendencies have been examined here. In the research, a distinction has been made between applicants’ personal versus organizational reactions.

The current chapter is structured as follows. First, the main findings of the five empirical studies reported in the four chapters of this dissertation will briefly be summarized. Subsequently, similarities and differences between these findings will be discussed in an integrative paragraph. Next, the main implications and contributions of these findings will be delineated. Finally, the limitations of the studies in this dissertation will be considered, and suggestions for future research will be presented.

Summary of Main Findings

In the present dissertation, several factors that moderate the relationship between selection events and applicant reactions have been proposed. The main theory guiding the work in this dissertation was Gilliland’s (1993) Selection Fairness Theory. As was discussed in Chapter 1, this theory is dominant in the field of applicant reactions research. Generally, it is expected that higher selection fairness, whether pertaining to procedures or decisions, leads to more positive
personal and organizational applicant reactions. In the present dissertation, it was found that this expectation should be nuanced, and that, when studying applicant reactions, other variables should be taken into account as well.

Chapter 2. Despite the vast amount of applicant reactions studies, few have examined combined effects of actual selection outcomes with perceived procedural and distributive fairness, and these have produced inconsistent results (Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004). Further, most of these studies have been conducted in laboratory settings, limiting external validity (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). The study described in Chapter 2 therefore examined the moderating role of perceived fairness in applicants’ reactions to positive and negative selection outcomes. Specifically, affective well-being and organizational attractiveness perceptions of actual applicants were measured pre-interview and post-outcome. First, based on selection fairness theory (Gilliland, 1993), it was hypothesized that hired applicants would have highest affective well-being when they perceived the procedure or outcome as fair rather than unfair (i.e., procedural and distributive fairness, respectively). Conversely, rejected applicants were expected to report highest well-being when they perceived the procedure or outcome as unfair. Second, based on organizational justice research (Brockner et al., 1994), it was expected that a selection outcome would have greatest impact on organizational attractiveness when applicants perceived the procedure or the outcome as unfair.

The results largely supported our propositions. First, distributive fairness moderated the relationship between selection outcome and affective well-being. As expected, hired applicants had more positive feelings when they perceived the outcome as fair, whereas rejected applicants had more positive feelings when they thought the outcome was unfair. Apparently, for affective well-being, perceiving the selection outcome as fair is only beneficial when one is hired; when rejected, perceiving the outcome as fair appears to be harmful. Unlike expectations, procedural fairness did not moderate the outcome – well-being relationship. Procedural fairness did, however, affect an organization’s reputation. As hypothesized, organizational attractiveness perceptions of hired applicants differed most from that of rejected applicants in situations that were perceived as unfair (i.e., procedure or outcome). Apparently, how people think about an organization is influenced most when they perceive the procedure or the outcome
as unfair. Interestingly, however, the interaction patterns for procedural and distributive fairness were different. More specifically, procedural fairness merely affected organizational perceptions of applicants who were rejected: they perceived the organization as more attractive when they thought the decision was based on fair procedures. Interestingly, applicants who were hired were indifferent to procedural fairness. That is, no differences in organizational attractiveness perceptions were found between individuals who were hired and thought the decision was based on fair procedures and those who thought the hiring decision was based on unfair procedures.

Strikingly, and in contrast to procedural fairness findings, distributive fairness only affected organizational perceptions of hired applicants, and not perceptions of rejected applicants. More specifically, people who were hired but felt this decision was unfair found the organization far less attractive than hired people who perceived the decision as fair. To our surprise, the attractiveness of the organization as perceived by rejected applicants did not depend on how fair they thought this decision was. These findings seem to suggest that for applicants who receive a job offer, the fairness of the outcome itself is most important in determining organizational attractiveness perceptions. For applicants who were rejected for the job, however, attractiveness of the organization is influenced most by procedural fairness perceptions.

Chapter 3 zoomed in on some of the findings of the second chapter, by more closely examining the role of feedback and fairness in reactions of rejected individuals in a controlled setting. For this purpose, a laboratory study into the effects of specific performance feedback and perceived fairness on allegedly rejected individuals’ affective well-being and self-evaluations was conducted. Based on prior feedback research (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), it was first postulated that receiving specific feedback about one’s (suboptimal) performance on a selection test would negatively affect rejected applicants’ well-being and self-evaluations. According to selection fairness theory (Gilliland, 1993), it was further expected that procedural and distributive fairness would influence the impact of feedback on rejected individuals’ well-being and self-evaluations. We tested our propositions with an experimental design in which participants (mostly students) were asked to take two GMA-tests, and were randomly provided with either
specific feedback or no specific feedback about their (alleged) suboptimal test performance in their rejection message. Measuring perceptions pre-test and post-feedback enabled us to test for causality. The results largely supported our hypotheses. First, it was demonstrated that providing people with feedback is not always as advantageous as often assumed. That is, receiving specific feedback about one’s suboptimal test performance harmed both individuals’ affective well-being as well as their self-evaluations. Importantly, when specific feedback about test performance was provided, differential patterns were found for well-being and self-evaluations of individuals. Well-being also decreased for rejected individuals not receiving specific feedback, yet this decrease was significantly smaller than when specific feedback was provided. Strikingly, self-evaluations of rejected individuals who did not receive specific feedback increased, despite the fact that they were rejected due to their substandard test performance.

Further, results revealed that distributive fairness strengthened the negative effect of specific performance feedback on affective well-being. That is, when individuals received specific feedback, those who perceived the outcome as unfair had far more negative feelings than those who perceived the outcome as fair. In contrast, when no specific feedback was received, people who perceived the outcome as unfair showed more positive feelings than people who perceived the outcome as fair. Unlike expectations, procedural fairness was not found to moderate the feedback – well-being relationship. In contrast to findings for well-being, procedural fairness moderated the relationship between feedback and self-evaluations after rejection. That is, when individuals did not receive specific feedback about their suboptimal test performance, those who perceived the selection procedure as unfair reported higher self-evaluations than those who perceived it as fair. Distributive fairness did not moderate the negative effect of performance feedback on self-evaluations.

The results of this study suggest that specific feedback about substandard performance, resulting in a rejection decision, has a more negative impact on applicants than more general feedback about such a decision. Given that differential interaction patterns occurred between performance feedback and fairness perceptions, the question arose whether individual differences in
attributional processing of selection events could moderate the effect of fairness on outcomes. This question was addressed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4. Building on the results reported in Chapters 2 and 3, the research reported in Chapter 4 investigated applicants’ reactions to rejection from an attributional approach. We examined the impact of performance feedback and fairness perceptions on rejected applicants’ affective well-being and organizational perceptions with taking applicants’ attributional styles into account. Two studies were designed: a laboratory (Study 4.1) and an online study (Study 4.2).

In Study 4.1 we hypothesized that applicant attributional style would moderate the influence of distributive fairness on well-being after rejection. This proposition was tested with a within-person design. Participants (mostly students) received a rejection message that was allegedly based on suboptimal performance on two computerized GMA-tests (no specific performance feedback). Measuring well-being pre-test and post-feedback enabled us to test for causality. In line with expectations, a moderation effect was found for attributional style: differences in post-rejection well-being between more versus less optimistically attributing individuals were largest when distributive fairness perceptions were low. A closer look at the interaction pattern shows that, when the outcome was perceived as unfair, individuals with a more optimistic style reported higher well-being than those with a pessimistic style. Strikingly, when the outcome was perceived as fair, individuals with a more optimistic attributional style reported lower well-being than those with a pessimistic style.

The purpose of Study 4.2 was threefold. The first goal was to replicate the Study 4.1 finding that the effect of distributive fairness on post-rejection well-being is moderated by attributional processing. The second goal of this study was to examine whether an interactive effect of performance feedback, distributive fairness and attributional style on post-rejection well-being would occur. The final goal was to investigate whether such a three-way interaction would also exist for organizational perceptions. These expectations were tested by means of experimental manipulation in an online environment in which participants (all students) were again randomly provided with either specific feedback or no specific feedback about their (alleged) suboptimal test performance in their rejection message. Measuring well-being and organizational perceptions pre-test
and post-feedback enabled us to test for possible causality. The results largely supported our expectations. First, as in Study 4.1, we found that, when no specific feedback about test performance was provided in a rejection message, distributive fairness and attributional style interactively influenced post-rejection well-being. Second, an interactive effect of performance feedback, distributive fairness and attributional style on well-being indeed occurred. Overall, rejected individuals’ well-being substantially decreased after provision of specific performance feedback. Further, for all individuals receiving specific feedback rather than unspecific feedback, perceiving their rejection as fair led to higher well-being, regardless of attributional style. When no specific feedback was provided, however, perceived fairness of the rejection hardly mattered to individuals with a pessimistic attributional style. Conversely, for individuals with an optimistic style, fairness was very important: they reported highest well-being when they had low fairness perceptions.

Finally, the expected three-way interaction effect of feedback, fairness and attributional style was not found for organizational perceptions. However, the pattern of results provided some valuable information. First, as for well-being, a negative effect of specific performance feedback in a rejection message on organizational perceptions was again found. Unlike findings for well-being, however, this effect was only observed for individuals with an optimistic attributional style; attractiveness perceptions of ‘pessimists’ did not change by feedback. More specifically, when no feedback was provided, ‘optimistically attributing’ individuals found the organization more attractive than those with a more pessimistic style, but when feedback was provided, ‘optimists’ had lower attractiveness perceptions than ‘pessimists’. Furthermore, it was observed that distributive fairness positively influenced organizational perceptions, whether feedback was provided or not, and regardless of attributional style. In other words, the more individuals perceived their rejection as fair, the more attractive they found the organization.

An interesting finding of Study 4.2 is that, when no specific feedback was provided, distributive fairness positively influenced optimistically attributing individuals’ organizational perceptions but negatively influenced well-being. That is, ‘optimistic’ respondents who did not receive specific feedback reported to find
the organization less attractive, but to feel better when they thought their rejection was unfair (as compared to fair). In sum, the results of both experiments reported in Chapter 4 provide strong support for the notion that applicants’ attributional styles influence their reactions to selection events.

In Chapter 5, the (interactive) effects of feedback, fairness and attributional processing, as reported in Chapter 4, were investigated for people’s attitudes toward taking selection tests. Furthermore, it was examined whether levels of performance feedback (high versus low scores) differentially affected test-taking attitude. We again used experimental manipulations in a laboratory environment, in which participants were invited to take two GMA-tests. Participants (mostly students) were randomly provided with specific feedback including high or low scores, or no specific feedback about their (alleged) suboptimal test performance in their rejection message.

As hypothesized, provision of more specific performance feedback in a rejection message had a negative effect on test-taking attitude. Additionally, results revealed that levels of performance feedback differentially affected test-taking attitude. That is, individuals receiving a rejection message with high (but still substandard) performance scores reported a better attitude than those receiving low (substandard) scores. Interestingly, the test-taking attitude of individuals receiving high scores did not differ from those who did not receive specific performance feedback in their rejection message, whereas attitude of those receiving low scores was much lower. Second, as expected, an interactive effect of performance feedback and procedural fairness was found for applicants’ test-taking attitude after rejection: participants who received specific feedback about their (suboptimal) test performance reported a more positive attitude when they perceived the procedure as fair. In contrast, participants who did not receive specific performance feedback reported a more positive attitude when they perceived the procedure as unfair. Finally, the expected three-way interaction of performance feedback, perceived procedural fairness and attributional style on post-rejection attitude adds a further nuance to this finding. That is, when specific feedback was provided, both optimistically and pessimistically attributing people reported a more positive test-taking attitude when they perceived the selection procedure as fair. In contrast, when no specific feedback was provided, procedural
fairness differently affected individuals with an optimistic versus those with a pessimistic attributional style. Strikingly, without having specific feedback about their test performance, ‘optimistic’ individuals reported highest test-taking attitude when they perceived the procedure as unfair.

To resume, the studies reported in the preceding chapters demonstrate that: (1) both perceived procedural and distributive fairness (differently) influence applicants’ personal and organizational reactions to selection events, (2) in a rejection situation, feedback about test performance negatively influences personal, but not organizational reactions, and (3) applicant attributional processing moderates the influence of perceived fairness and performance feedback. Below, the main similarities and inconsistencies among these findings will be discussed and a tentative explanation for these findings will be provided.

Integration and Explanation of Main Findings

In the preceding section, the findings of the studies described in this dissertation have been discussed separately. Below, the similarities and differences between these findings will be discerned, and the findings of the work discussed in the separate chapters will be presented in integration. The first section will focus on direct effects of fairness and feedback found in these studies. Consequently, interactive effects between fairness, feedback and attributional processing on both types of reactions will be discussed. Finally, possible explanations for the findings in this dissertation will be provided.

Procedural Fairness

Overall, in this dissertation, no direct relationships were found between perceived procedural fairness and personal reactions. In the field study reported in Chapter 2, the perceived fairness of the procedure (i.e., interview) did not influence applicants’ affective well-being, regardless of whether they were hired or rejected. Similarly, in the laboratory study (Chapter 3), perceived procedural fairness (i.e., GMA-tests) did not affect rejected applicants’ well-being nor their self-evaluations, regardless of whether they received feedback about their (allegedly substandard) performance in the rejection message or not.

In contrast to personal outcomes, procedural fairness generally had a positive influence on organizational reactions of applicants in the actual
application situation (Study 2). These preliminary findings seem to suggest that procedural fairness differently affects applicants’ personal versus organizational reactions. That is, fairness perceptions did not change people’s well-being or self-evaluations, whilst the organization was perceived as more attractive when procedures were perceived as fair. (It should be noted that perceived procedural fairness also influenced rejected applicants’ test-taking attitudes. That is, higher fairness perceptions generally resulted in higher test-taking attitudes after being rejected (Study 5).

Distributive Fairness

In most of the studies in this dissertation, no direct relationships were found between distributive fairness and applicants’ personal reactions. That is, overall, perceptions of outcome fairness did not influence well-being or self-evaluations of actual applicants (Study 2) or experiment participants (Study 3 and Study 4.1), regardless of whether this outcome was positive or negative (Study 2), or whether rejection feedback was provided (Study 3 and Study 4.1). Note that in Study 4.2 participants reported higher well-being when they perceived their rejection as fair. However, this effect was entirely due to the condition in which rejected participants were provided with more specific feedback about their substandard performance. Conversely, distributive fairness consistently affected people’s perceptions of the organization. Overall, if actual applicants were rejected and perceived their rejection as fair, they regarded the organization as more attractive (Study 2). Similarly, allegedly rejected experiment participants reported higher organizational perceptions if the rejection was perceived as fair (Study 4.2).

In sum, in the studies presented here, distributive fairness differently affected organizational perceptions and personal reactions. Again, well-being and self-evaluations largely remained unchanged by (distributive) fairness perceptions, whereas the organization seemed more attractive to applicants when they perceived the selection outcome as fair.

Performance Feedback

In the studies reported in this dissertation, performance feedback consistently had a negative impact on personal reactions. Both in a laboratory (Study 3) and online (Study 4.2) environment, allegedly rejected individuals reported lower well-being when receiving more specific performance feedback.
Similarly, rejected individuals’ self-evaluations generally decreased due to reception of more specific feedback (Study 3). Finally, rejected individuals’ test-taking attitude in general declined when receiving more specific feedback in another laboratory environment (Study 5). These findings are in line with other research, in which performance feedback negatively influenced personal outcomes such as applicant self-esteem, mood and well-being (Bauer, Maertz, Dolen, & Campion, 1998; Ilgen & Davis, 2000; Ployhart, Ryan, & Bennett, 1999). In contrast, no direct effect of performance feedback on organizational reactions was found in this dissertation (Study 4.2): rejected individuals’ organizational attractiveness perceptions did not change due to receiving more specific feedback. The findings for performance feedback again seem to suggest that applicants differ in their personal versus organizational reactions: well-being, self-evaluations and test-taking attitudes decreased with more specific feedback, whilst perceptions of the organization’s attractiveness remained the same.

**Interactive Effects**

Next to the direct effects described, fairly consistent interactive effects were found in this dissertation. First, interactive effects of selection outcomes and performance feedback with fairness were found for personal reactions. Selection outcomes interacted with distributive fairness on well-being (Study 2). As may be expected, for hired applicants, perceiving being hired as fair resulted in higher well-being, whereas perceiving this as unfair led to lower well-being. This is in accordance with previous findings by Gilliland (1993) and Ployhart and Ryan (1998) that individuals who are hired but perceive this outcome as unfair may feel unsatisfied. Strikingly, for rejected applicants, perceiving their rejection as unfair resulted in higher well-being than perceiving it as fair.

In a similar vein, interaction patterns were found for performance feedback and (distributive) fairness in a laboratory experiment (Study 3) and the online experiment (Study 4.2). In both studies, allegedly rejected participants receiving more specific feedback reported highest well-being when they regarded being rejected as fair (i.e., high distributive fairness). In contrast, participants who were rejected without receiving specific feedback showed highest well-being when they thought being rejected was unfair (i.e., low distributive fairness). Further, largely comparable interaction effects were found for feedback with procedural fairness.
for self-evaluations and test-taking attitudes. That is, for participants who were rejected and received more specific feedback, fairness did not influence self-evaluations. In contrast, for participants who were rejected and received unspecific feedback, self-evaluations were higher when they perceived the procedure as unfair (Study 3).

Finally, rejected participants who received specific feedback showed higher test-taking attitude when they perceived the procedure as fair, whereas those who received unspecific feedback again reported higher test-taking attitude when they perceived the procedure as unfair (Study 5).

Similar to personal reactions, interactive effects were found for reactions toward the organization. Notably, however, patterns for organizational reactions highly differed from those for personal reactions. As may be expected, actual applicants who were hired found the organization most attractive when they perceived this decision as fair (i.e., high distributive fairness) rather than unfair (Study 2). Further, actual applicants who were rejected also thought the organization was more attractive when they perceived the selection procedure as fair (i.e., high procedural fairness). Likewise, rejected participants in the online experiment (Study 4.2) found the organization more attractive when they thought that being rejected for the job was fair (i.e., high distributive fairness).

In sum, applicants’ personal versus organizational reactions were differentially affected by selection outcomes, feedback and fairness. That is, when being rejected without specific performance feedback, well-being, self-evaluations and test-taking attitudes apparently were harmed by higher fairness perceptions (of the procedure or the outcome), whereas reactions toward the organization generally benefited from higher (procedural and distributive) perceived fairness. These findings warrant the investigation of individual differences in attributional processing in applicant reactions formation.

In line with expectations, it was found that individual differences in attributional style accounted for differences in reactions. First, fairness perceptions and attributional style interactively influenced personal reactions in two laboratory experiments (Study 4.1 and Study 5) and in the online setting (Study 4.2). Importantly, the pattern of interactions was consistent over these three studies. That is, when rejected participants received more specific performance feedback,
no interaction between fairness and attributional style was found. When receiving feedback, higher fairness generally resulted in higher well-being (Study 4.2; distributive) and test-taking attitudes (Study 5; procedural), regardless of attributional style. Conversely, when no specific feedback was provided, fairness and attributional style did interact. More specifically, reactions of people with a less optimistic attributional style did not depend on fairness. In contrast, optimistically attributing individuals reported both highest well-being (Study 4.2) and test-taking attitudes (Study 5) when they thought the procedure (Study 5) or the outcome (Study 4.2) was unfair. Finally, in contrast to personal reactions, no such three-way interaction was found for organizational reactions (Study 4.2). However, the pattern of results provided some interesting information regarding a main effect of fairness and a two-way interaction between feedback and attributional style. That is, higher fairness perceptions generally led people to find the organization more attractive. Strikingly, in addition, feedback solely affected organizational perceptions of optimistically attributing individuals. That is, when specific performance feedback was provided, optimistically attributing people regarded the organization as less attractive than ‘less optimistic’ individuals. In contrast, however, when no such feedback was provided, optimistically attributing people found the organization more attractive than did less optimistic individuals.

To resume, the findings of the present dissertation seem to suggest that feedback and fairness differently affect applicants’ personal versus organizational reactions, and that this may be due to attributional processing. In the next section, the implications and contributions of the reported findings will be discussed.

**Implications and Contributions**

The present dissertation aimed to provide a better understanding of applicants’ reactions to selection events. The findings of the research offer several theoretical and practical implications. In this section, the main implications of the present research findings will be outlined and contributions of this work to the applicant reactions literature will be addressed.

*Theoretical*

The first major implication of the present research is that the relationship between selection events and applicant reactions may be moderated by several
other factors. As argued in Chapter 1, previous applicant reactions research has typically focused on direct relationships between selection events and applicants’ reactions, and this research has rendered inconsistent results. For instance, positive selection outcomes in some studies have been demonstrated to lead to favorable personal and organizational reactions, whereas in other studies, no or even negative relationships were found (e.g., Bauer et al., 1998; Gilliland, 1994; Kluger & Rothstein, 1993; Ployhart & Ryan, 1997; 1998; Ployhart et al., 1999; Schroth & Shah, 2000; Truxillo, Bauer, & Sanchez, 2001; Truxillo, Bauer, Campion, & Paronto, 2002). Following Ryan and Ployhart’s (2000) proposition that these direct effects are likely to be moderated by other factors, we investigated whether the strength and direction of relationships between selection events and applicants’ reactions would be contingent on other factors, such as applicants’ perceptions, experiences, and dispositions. In all five empirical studies presented in this dissertation, perceived fairness, feedback, and attributional style were found to (interactively) influence these relationships. This finding has interesting implications for applicant reactions research, because it may explain some of the inconsistencies in previous research, and why in some studies no relationships were found between selection events and reactions.

The studies in this dissertation examined the influence of procedural and distributive fairness perceptions. Gilliland (1993) expected a positive relationship between procedural fairness perceptions and applicant reactions. However, previous research has indeed demonstrated a generally positive effect of procedural fairness for organizational reactions (e.g., Bauer et al., 1998; 2001; Bauer, Truxillo, Paronto, Campion, & Weekley, 2004; Gilliland, 1994; Ployhart & Ryan, 1997; 1998; Truxillo et al., 2002), but inconsistent results for personal reactions (e.g., Bauer et al., 1998; Gilliland, 1994; Ployhart & Ryan, 1997; Truxillo et al., 2001; 2002). In the studies in this dissertation, no direct relationship was found between procedural fairness and personal reactions (i.e., well-being, self-evaluations). In contrast, a generally positive effect of procedural fairness on organizational reactions was found.

Further, to date, most applicant reactions researchers have focused on effects of procedural rather than distributive fairness (Hausknecht et al., 2004), especially with regard to personal reactions. Because the fairness of the outcome may even be
more influential in determining applicant reactions than the fairness of the procedure (Bauer et al., 1998; Ryan & Ployhart, 2000), an important contribution of the present dissertation is the examination of the indirect influence of distributive fairness on both personal and organizational applicant reactions. Overall, no direct relationships were found between distributive fairness and applicants’ personal reactions but indirect relationships consistently occurred. Conversely, distributive fairness positively influenced people’s perceptions of the organization. These findings suggest that procedural and distributive fairness differently affect applicants’ personal versus organizational reactions. An organizational justice meta-analysis (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996) suggested that interactions exist between procedural fairness and the selection outcome or its perceived fairness. The findings in this dissertation showed that interactions between procedural fairness and (fairness of) the selection outcome indeed existed, but only for organizational reactions. In addition, interactions between the selection outcome and the perceived fairness of that outcome (distributive fairness) were found. Thus, as was discussed in Chapter 1, the results of our studies suggest that the organizational justice propositions do not necessarily apply to applicant reactions. Further, the assumptions made by selection fairness theory should be nuanced: that is, higher perceived fairness often does result in more positive reactions toward the organization, but not necessarily in more favorable personal reactions. The findings reported in the present dissertation constitute a first step toward a better understanding of the highly variable effects of fairness in selection situations.

The second major issue that was addressed in this dissertation arose from the widespread belief that receiving feedback generally is beneficial for people. Codes of testing practice (for instance in the US, the UK, and the Netherlands) often entail the provision of feedback to applicants that is as detailed as possible. Following from this, many organizations convey detailed rejection messages to applicants. However, in line with previous studies into feedback effects (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), the results of our studies demonstrated that well-being, self-evaluations and test-taking attitudes of rejected individuals may instead be harmed by the provision of (specific) feedback about substandard performance. These findings have interesting implications for applicant reactions research,
because they suggest that, especially in a rejection situation, feedback may not be as advantageous as is generally assumed.

Third, to our knowledge, this dissertation was the first to empirically document the influence of attributional processing on applicant reactions. The findings in the present dissertation imply that attributions are an important factor in determining applicant reactions. Moreover, the (differential) findings for applicants’ personal and organizational reactions reported here can potentially be explained by self-serving bias theory (Miller & Ross, 1975). According to this theory, people generally are less likely to claim responsibility for their failures than for their successes, and try to attribute this failure to some external factor. Thus, a self-serving bias may particularly occur when applicants receive a negative selection outcome (Ployhart & Harold, 2004). In keeping their well-being and self-evaluations intact, rejected individuals seem to lower their perceptions of the organization or the procedure that preceded the decision. Further, individual differences seem to exist in attributional processing. Particularly individuals with a more optimistic attributional style show more favorable personal reactions when they can blame some external factor for the cause of their negative experience (Ployhart & Ryan, 1997). In contrast, people with a less optimistic style experience more negative personal perceptions when rejected.

Moreover, self-serving reasoning in a rejection situation may more easily take place when no feedback about performance is provided, rather than when more specific information about performance is included in the rejection message, especially when performance does not meet requirements. Receiving more specific feedback may therefore lower the possibility of externally attributing a negative outcome, thus negatively affecting post-rejection personal reactions. This may be particularly true for those individuals who generally tend to make optimistic attributions. Relating to this issue, another explanation for the negative feedback findings may be that consensus information (e.g., in a selection context: selection ratio) influences people’s reactions (covariation principle: Kelley, 1967; see also Ployhart, Ehrhart, & Hayes, 2005).

In the studies in this dissertation, individuals who did not receive specific performance feedback in their rejection message (i.e., who were allegedly classified with a group consisting of eighty percent of participants), reported more favorable
reactions than those who received more specific feedback (e.g., “50-70%”), representing only twenty percent of participants. For most applicants, it may be more difficult to cope with rejection if many other applicants are accepted than if most others, too, are rejected. Mere provision of suboptimal test scores in the form of high consensus information could help protect against decreases in applicant well-being and self-perceptions. As Thorndike noted as early as 1913, one of the detrimental properties of feedback is its relativity. That is, a feedback message practically always entails a comparison to one or more others. This is in line with Kluger and DeNisi (1996), according to whom the comparison of oneself to others enhances ego-involvement, making it even more important to reduce the negative state following a rejection.

Finally, despite growing research attention for applicant reactions, knowledge of applicants’ well-being after receiving selection decisions up to today was notably lacking. In several studies of this dissertation, it was demonstrated that well-being can be greatly harmed by selection events that are negative or seem unfair to the applicant. Because well-being in turn may greatly influence subsequent applicant intentions and behavior, the findings of the present dissertation are an important contribution to the existing literature on applicant personal reactions to selection events.

Practical

The empirical studies in this dissertation yielded several important insights concerning applicants’ reactions to selection events that may be valuable to practitioners working with applicants. Our results indicate that practitioners should take notice of the negative function of specific performance feedback on applicants that are rejected. Whilst applicants should not be deprived of the right to obtain their performance scores, the standard provision of performance measures after selection tests should be reconsidered. If mere provision of substandard test scores can cause severe decreases in people’s test-taking attitude, HRM-specialists should clearly ruminate on their selection explanations policy. This does not necessarily imply that performance feedback should by no means be given to rejected applicants. It may well be possible that certain groups of applicants benefit from learning their performance scores, some even being able to construe more realistic self-images based on this kind of feedback. However,
professional standards prescribing provision of feedback that is as detailed as possible potentially need to be reconsidered. Furthermore, until more insight is gained into which applicants need what kind of rejection feedback, recruiters should be prudent in the provision of detailed performance feedback after rejection.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

As is true for most research, the findings presented in this dissertation need to be interpreted with some caution. The main limitations of the empirical research as discussed in the preceding chapters will briefly be revisited and elaborated in this section. In addition, directions for future research that may further substantiate the present findings will be presented.

*External and Ecological Validity*

First, the external and ecological validity of the findings in several of the studies reported here warrants discussion. Most of the studies presented in this dissertation were conducted in hypothetical settings, concerning a laboratory (Study 3, Study 4.1, Study 5) or online (Study 4.2) testing environment. It is unclear whether the findings in these settings, with mainly (under)graduate university students tested, are true for actual job applicants. This may have limited the extent to which these research findings can be generalized to other people or settings (external validity) and the extent to which the findings are representative of what happens in actual selection situations (ecological validity).

However, the study settings were designed to resemble a selection context as closely as possible. Participants were asked to imagine being a job applicant, and were given a fairly extensive description of the fictitious job and the recruiting organization. The job description was designed to be attractive to student as well as non-student participants. It contained a part-time job, with opportunities of full-time employment, at a research and consulting agency. Furthermore, similar to an authentic application situation, an achievement-oriented context was created by informing students they had to take two GMA-tests and belong to the best twenty percent in order to be invited for a job interview. Further, participants in general seemed to be unaware of the purpose of the studies: they usually indicated to be motivated to do well on the tests. Moreover, many participants’ comments – even
after debriefing - contained possible reasons for their substandard test performance (e.g., not enough sleep, headache). This suggests that people really were motivated to do well on the tests. Thus, our finding of effects with individuals lacking the motivated context of an actual selection process seems to imply that results may present a conservative estimate of effects with actual rejected applicants. Moreover, the pre-occupational samples of these studies do not seem to limit generalizability of results. Most Dutch students have part-time jobs beside their studies, and therefore often have ample application experience. Further, we tested our assumptions in several study settings (laboratory and online), using different samples (Dutch and American). Importantly, the studies show fairly consistent patterns, which suggests external validity.

Finally, several theoretical reasons existed for using a hypothetical context. First, it is extremely difficult to investigate interaction effects without experimental control over conditions (Gilliland & Chan, 2001; Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). Furthermore, manipulating performance feedback in actual application settings is less likely to be possible and may even be unethical (Bauer et al., 1998; Ployhart & Ryan, 1998). Moreover, although it has been found that some applicant reactions are stronger in hypothetical than in authentic settings (Hausknecht et al., 2004) previous studies have also demonstrated reasonable correspondence between findings in laboratory and field settings (e.g., Bauer et al., 1998; Bauer et al, 2006; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Smither, Reilly, Millsap, Pearlman, & Stoffey, 1993).

Although we believe that laboratory experiments are relevant and necessary, future research investigating applicant reactions in real application settings, where real jobs are at stake, is clearly needed to get more insight into these matters. Longitudinal investigation of the long-term impact of fairness and feedback on applicants in both hiring and rejection situations would be particularly worthwhile.

Method Bias

Another limitation concerns a possible method bias in several of the studies presented. In some studies the dependent variable(s) and independent variable(s) were measured at a single point in time. For instance, perceptions of distributive fairness were measured simultaneously with outcome variables (i.e., individuals’ reactions) (in Study 2, Study 3, Study 4.1, 4.2). Therefore, a change in individuals’
reactions, such as well-being or organizational attractiveness, could either be the result or the cause of a change in distributive fairness. Thus, conclusions of causality of perceived distributive fairness on reactions should be drawn with extra caution. Similarly, perceptions of procedural fairness in some studies were measured simultaneously with outcome variables (Study 2, Study 3) and with distributive fairness perceptions. Therefore, procedural fairness perceptions in these studies may likewise be the result of alleged reactions, or may have been influenced by the (fairness of the) outcome or the feedback provided. However, the (interactive) effects of selection outcomes and distributive fairness perceptions (fairness of the outcome) can only be tested after this outcome is received by applicants (Bauer et al., 1998). Further, in one study (Study 5), procedural fairness perceptions were measured directly after testing, but before outcomes and feedback were provided. Because the pattern of results in this study is largely similar to the patterns for the studies in which procedural fairness was measured post-outcome, the moment of measurement may not have influenced results to a large extent.

Feedback Manipulation

Another limitation pertains to the manipulation of performance feedback in the rejection message: the manipulation of feedback specificity may have been confounded with feedback level (i.e., performance percentile). That is, participants in the high specificity feedback conditions were not only informed of their alleged performance percentile, but received a percentile with a ten or twenty percent range (e.g., “70-80%”, “50-70%”). Participants who were not given specific feedback were informed their performance was below the twenty percent best performers. Therefore, they may have made assumptions about their performance anywhere from zero to 80, meaning an 80% range. If so, specificity of feedback may have been confounded with beliefs about performance level. Note, however, that in Study 5 a distinction was made in the more specific feedback condition, with high and low performance scores. Results revealed that the interaction pattern for feedback with high scores did not greatly differ from the pattern for low scores, but did differ from that for unspecific feedback. Future research is needed to further substantiate these assumptions.
In addition, examination of feedback effects in this dissertation has been constrained to the provision of performance scores based on cognitive selection tests. However, reactions to performance feedback may well vary over selection test type (e.g., GMA-tests, personality tests) and selection method (e.g., assessments, interviews). More specifically, a selection decision or explanation following ‘maximum’ performance methods (e.g., GMA-tests) could lead to highly different attributions than those based on ‘typical’ performance methods (e.g., personality tests). Thus, studies in which the effects of explanations and attributional processing are integrated could be extended to other selection methods.

**Measurement**

In our studies, we measured individuals’ attributional styles. However, to get more insight into the relationship between attributional style and applicant reactions, researchers should also investigate people’s actual attributions. Moreover, the dimensions of stability and controllability deserve more research attention in the applicant reactions area. Attributing a negative selection decision to an internal but unstable cause (e.g., substandard performance on a test due to lack of preparation), for instance, might render very different results than attribution to an internal and stable cause (e.g., substandard performance due to low ability).

Finally, although findings in this dissertation may be explained by self-serving biases or the covariation principle, the actual occurrence of such biases has not been empirically tested here. The possibility that rejected individuals may engage in self-serving attributional processing deserves more research attention. Self-serving biases may be beneficial to applicants, for instance to maintain well-being and a positive self-image. However, it can simultaneously result in negative reactions toward the organization. More insight is needed into the psychological processes through which this bias develops and what consequences it may have. Questions that arise from these results are: How does applicant self-serving attributional processing relate to consensus information? Could people with an optimistic attributional style be more prone to using consensus information in their own favor?
Conclusion

The research described in this dissertation has examined possible moderators of the relationship between selection events and applicant reactions. The five studies reported here were developed to increase our understanding of the effects of fairness, feedback and attributional processing in the formation of applicant reactions. The results revealed that these factors differentially affect personal and organizational reactions. Both procedural and distributive fairness may generally result in higher organizational attractiveness, but seem unrelated to well-being and self-evaluations. Conversely, feedback about substandard test performance seems to harm rejected individuals’ well-being, self-evaluations and test-taking attitudes, but not organizational attractiveness. Further, fairness, feedback and attributional style may interact to influence applicants’ reactions. Without specific feedback and with low fairness perceptions, optimistically attributing individuals tend to show more favorable personal, but less favorable organizational reactions, than less optimistic individuals. The findings of this research have answered several questions. Yet, as is true for all research, new questions have also been raised and many more remain to be answered.

To conclude, whilst it may be undesirable to take into account applicants’ attributional tendencies, it is in the interest of organizations to pay attention to applicants’ perceptions of the fairness of their selection procedures and outcomes. Finally, given that all applicants must somehow be informed of a selection decision, the challenge for researchers as well as practitioners is to design feedback in such a way that neither applicant nor organization is damaged.