Applicant reactions to selection events: interactive effects of fairness, feedback and attributions
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SUMMARY

Due to a surge in job mobility, the impact of selection events over the last decades has increasingly been investigated from the applicant’s perspective. As a result, studies of applicant reactions to all kinds of selection events have amounted. Examples of reactions studied are applicants’ well-being, self- and organizational perceptions, and attitudes toward test-taking (Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004). 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.

Despite the growing body of literature on the effects of selection events on applicants’ 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? Moreover, as argued in Chapter 1, many studies have found inconsistencies in the selection event – applicant reactions relationships. This leads to further questions, such as: 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 were addressed in the five empirical studies of this dissertation.

First, applicants may differ in the perceptions they have of the fairness of selection events (e.g., procedures, outcomes). Selection Fairness Theory (Gilliland, 1993) proposes that situational features influence applicants’ perceptions of the fairness of selection procedures and outcomes. Examples are selection test type, information about the selection procedure, or the behavior of recruiting personnel. Fairness perceptions are in turn expected to impinge upon applicants’ reactions during and after participation in a selection procedure.

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: The content, 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.

Third, dispositional differences exist between applicants. One important difference in applicants’ dispositions is their tendency to make certain attributions (i.e., ascribing experiences to certain causes, such as internal or external) for their selection experiences (Ployhart & Harold, 2004; Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). An applicants’ attributional style may greatly influence his or her reactions to these experiences.

In sum, the research presented in this dissertation was developed to examine the influence of several situational and dispositional factors that may play a role in the formation of applicant reactions. Specifically, the (interactive) influences of fairness, feedback and applicant attributional tendencies have been examined. In the research, a distinction has been made between applicants’ personal versus organizational reactions. Below, the main findings of the five empirical studies reported in this dissertation will briefly be summarized and integrated.

**Summary of Main Findings**

In Chapter 2 of this dissertation we investigated whether perceived fairness would moderate relationships between selection outcomes and applicants’ reactions in an authentic selection setting. Based on selection fairness theory (Gilliland, 1993), we hypothesized that procedural and distributive fairness would moderate the effect of a selection outcome on applicant well-being. We expected hired applicants to experience highest well-being when they perceived the procedure or outcome as fair rather than unfair. Conversely, rejected applicants were expected to report highest well-being when they perceived the procedure or outcome as unfair.

Further, based on organizational justice research (Brockner et al., 1994), we hypothesized that a selection outcome would have greatest impact on organizational attractiveness when applicants perceived the procedure or the outcome as unfair. To examine these hypotheses, a two-wave design was used, in which reactions of actual applicants applying for a variety of jobs with a private profit organization were measured pre-interview and post-outcome.
The results of the study largely supported our hypotheses. First, it was observed that distributive fairness moderated the relationship between selection outcome and affective well-being. Applicants who were hired reported more positive feelings when they perceived the outcome as fair, whereas rejected applicants showed more positive feelings when they thought the outcome was unfair. Unlike expectations, procedural fairness did not moderate the relationship between a selection outcome and well-being.

Second, as expected, differences in organizational attractiveness perceptions between hired and rejected applicants were largest in situations that were perceived as unfair. Interestingly, however, the patterns for procedural and distributive fairness were different. Rejected applicants perceived the organization as more attractive when they thought the decision was based on fair procedures. In contrast, hired applicants appeared to be indifferent to procedural fairness. Strikingly, distributive fairness only (negatively) affected organizational perceptions of hired applicants, and not rejected ones. The results of this study support the notion that procedural and distributive fairness perceptions indeed (differently) moderate the effect of selection outcomes on applicant personal and organizational reactions.

In the study reported in Chapter 3 we investigated possible interactive effects of performance feedback and perceived fairness on rejected individuals’ personal reactions. Based on prior feedback research (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), it was first hypothesized that specific as compared to unspecific feedback about one’s (suboptimal) performance on a selection test would negatively affect rejected applicants’ affective well-being and self-evaluations. Second, building on Selection Fairness Theory (Gilliland, 1993), procedural and distributive fairness were postulated to moderate the influence of performance feedback on applicant reactions. We tested our propositions with an experimental laboratory study, in which participants (mainly students) were asked to imagine being a job applicant. They were provided with a description of the job and organization, and were asked to take two General Mental Ability-tests, on which they allegedly had to belong to the best twenty percent to be invited to the next selection round. Upon test completion, all participants were given a rejection message, which randomly included either unspecific feedback (“you do not belong to the best twenty
percent”; no performance percentile) or more specific feedback (including a performance percentile, e.g., “50-70%”) about their alleged test performance. Measuring perceptions pre-test and post-feedback enabled us to test for causality.

The results of this study largely supported our hypotheses. First, it was demonstrated that performance feedback indeed negatively influenced participants’ well-being and self-evaluations. Strikingly, self-evaluations of rejected individuals who received unspecific feedback increased, despite the fact that they were rejected due to their substandard test performance. Further, results revealed that procedural and distributive fairness both moderated the influence of feedback on post-rejection applicant reactions, but in different ways. Distributive fairness was found to strengthen the negative effect of specific performance feedback on affective well-being. When more specific feedback was provided, participants who perceived their rejection as unfair reported lower well-being than those who perceived their rejection as fair. In contrast, when no specific feedback was provided, individuals who thought being rejected was unfair showed higher well-being than those who thought this was fair.

Procedural fairness was not found to moderate the feedback – well-being relationship, but did moderate the negative effect of feedback on post-rejection self-evaluations. That is, fairness merely mattered to applicants when no specific feedback about performance was provided in the rejection message: here, individuals who perceived the selection procedure as unfair reported higher self-evaluations than those who perceived the procedure as fair. These results suggest that specific feedback about substandard test performance, resulting in a rejection decision, has a more negative impact on applicants than unspecific feedback. Given that differential interaction patterns occurred between performance feedback and fairness perceptions, the question arose whether individual differences in reaction formation to selection events could moderate the effect of fairness on outcomes.

In Chapter 4, effects of feedback and distributive fairness on rejected applicants’ well-being and organizational attractiveness therefore were further examined, extended with attributional processing. Based on attribution theory (Weiner, 1985), we first assumed that post-rejection well-being would be higher for people with a more optimistic attributional style (i.e., attributing positive events to internal and negative events to external causes) than for people with a more
pessimistic style. Second, receiving more specific feedback about one’s (substandard) test performance may make it less easy to attribute a rejection to an external cause, and may stimulate the formation of internal attributions. Thus, more specific feedback may decrease the tendency of ‘optimists’ to make external attributions, and further encourage ‘pessimistic’ individuals to make internal attributions. Therefore, we expected that feedback, fairness and attributional style would interactively influence well-being. Third, we examined whether interactive effects of feedback, fairness and attributional style would also occur for organizational perceptions. Because external attributions for failure may well result in declines in organizational perceptions, particularly people with a more optimistic attributional style may blame the organization for their rejection, especially if they perceive their rejection as unfair. Hence, we expected that a possible interaction pattern for organizational perceptions would differ from that for well-being. We therefore proposed that, when no specific performance feedback is provided, an optimistic attributional style would lead to lower organizational perceptions, especially when fairness perceptions are low.

We investigated our hypotheses with two experimental studies. Study 4.1 entailed a laboratory setting with a within-subjects design, in which participants (mainly students) received a rejection message without performance feedback, allegedly based on suboptimal performance on two GMA-tests (similar to Study 2). Measuring well-being pre-test and post-feedback enabled us to test for causality. Study 4.2 was an online study with a between-subjects experimental design, in which participants (all students) were randomly provided with specific or unspecific feedback about their (alleged) suboptimal GMA-test performance. Measuring well-being and organizational perceptions pre-test and post-feedback again enabled us to test for possible causality.

Results largely supported our hypotheses. First, an interaction effect of distributive fairness and attributional style was found in Study 4.1. When no specific feedback was provided, differences in post-rejection well-being between more versus less optimistically attributing individuals were largest when distributive fairness perceptions were low, with optimistic individuals reporting highest post-rejection well-being. This finding was replicated in Study 4.2: again, when no specific feedback was provided, distributive fairness and attributional
style interacted, with a more optimistic attributional style leading to higher well-being when fairness perceptions were low.

Second, as expected, performance feedback negatively influenced post-rejection well-being. That is, overall, rejected individuals’ well-being substantially decreased after receiving more specific feedback about their (suboptimal) test performance. Interestingly, however, when more specific feedback about substandard test performance was given, fairness and attributional style did not interact. Instead, when receiving more specific feedback, perceiving a rejection as fair generally led to higher post-rejection applicant well-being, regardless of attributional style.

Finally, no interaction effect of fairness, feedback, and attributional style was found for organizational perceptions. However, the pattern of results provided some valuable information. Again, a negative effect of specific performance feedback was found. Unlike findings for well-being, however, feedback merely affected organizational perceptions of optimistically attributing individuals; 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’ reported lower attractiveness perceptions than ‘pessimists’. Finally, distributive fairness positively influenced organizational perceptions, whether feedback was provided or not, and regardless of an individual’s 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 their well-being. The findings of these two experiments provide strong support for the notion that applicants’ attributional styles influence their reactions to selection events.

In the study reported in Chapter 5 the (interactive) effects of feedback, fairness and attributional processing were investigated for people’s attitudes toward taking selection tests. Because test-taking attitude influences test performance, and differences in test-taking attitude seem related to differential ethnic test performance (Arvey et al., 1990; Chan et al., 1997), improving people’s
attitudes toward selection testing may reduce adverse impact and increase selection test validity. Based on our previous findings, we hypothesized a negative influence of performance feedback on test-taking attitude. Further, we expected specific feedback with high (but still substandard) test scores to result in higher test-taking attitudes of rejected individuals than specific feedback with lower (substandard) test scores. Finally, we supposed performance feedback, perceived fairness and attributional style to interactively influence test-taking attitude after rejection. Specifically, we expected that participants receiving specific feedback would report higher attitude when they perceived the selection procedure as fair, whereas (especially optimistic) participants not receiving specific feedback would report higher attitude when they perceived the procedure as unfair. We again used experimental manipulations in a laboratory environment, in which participants were invited to take two GMA-tests. Participants (mainly students) were randomly provided with specific feedback including high performance scores, specific feedback including low scores, or no specific feedback about their (alleged) suboptimal test performance in their rejection message.

The results largely supported our hypotheses. First, in line with expectations, provision of more specific performance feedback in a rejection message had a negative effect on post-rejection test-taking attitude. Further, as may be expected, feedback including higher (but still substandard) performance scores resulted in higher attitudes than feedback including lower performance scores. Interestingly, 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’ post-rejection test-taking attitude: participants who received specific feedback about their (suboptimal) test performance (high or low) 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 feedback, fairness and attributional style on post-rejection attitude was found. Overall, procedural fairness had a positive or neutral effect on test-taking attitude, with one clear
exception. That is, when specific feedback (high or low) was provided, both optimistically and pessimistically attributing people reported a more positive test-taking attitude when they perceived the selection procedure as fair. However, when no specific feedback was provided, procedural fairness differently affected ‘optimistic’ and ‘pessimistic’ individuals. In this situation, for pessimistic individuals, fairness again resulted in higher post-rejection test-taking attitude, whereas optimistic individuals here reported highest test-taking attitude when they perceived the procedure as unfair.

These results again suggest that specific feedback about substandard test performance has a more negative impact on applicants’ personal reactions than unspecific feedback, and that applicants’ attributional styles influence their reactions to selection events.

Implications and Contributions

The results of our studies first suggest that the organizational justice propositions do not necessarily apply to applicant reactions. Further, the assumptions made by selection fairness theory should be nuanced: 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. 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 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, these findings suggest individual differences in the
occurrence of a self-serving bias (Miller & Ross, 1975), where particularly individuals with a more optimistic attributional style keep their well-being and self-perceptions intact when simultaneously blaming some external factor for the cause of their negative experience (Ployhart & Ryan, 1997). In contrast, those with a more pessimistic style do not, and experience more negative personal perceptions than optimists, when rejected without receiving specific information on their own substandard test performance. Receiving more (specific) feedback may lower the possibility of externally attributing a negative outcome, thus negatively affecting post-rejection personal reactions, especially for individuals who tend to make external attributions for negative events.

Further, despite growing research attention for applicant reactions, knowledge of applicants’ well-being after receiving selection decisions up to today has notably been lacking. In several studies of this dissertation, it was demonstrated that well-being can be severely harmed by selection events that are negative for 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.

Finally, practitioners should take notice of the negative function of specific performance feedback on applicants that are rejected: 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.

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.