Emotional Reactions to Fairness and Favorable and Unfavorable Outcomes

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Abstract

The present study examined the combined effect of fairness judgements and emotional reactions to distributions of work positions in relation to work performance. In everyday life, people often encounter distributional situations where they evaluate outcomes that they and other persons receive. Part of this evaluation concerns how fair or equitable the distribution is, while at the same time the outcome to themselves and to others may also contribute to their assessment. It was assumed that a favorable outcome to oneself may result in a positive emotional reaction, whether it’s fair or not, while a positive outcome to somebody else, whether fair or not, may be associated with a feeling of envy. Participants read one of five possible work-related vignettes after which they rated emotions toward the boss, the coworker and self. Variations in the vignettes were made in with regard to own performance compared to the coworker’s performance and own outcome in comparison with the coworker’s outcome (i.e., salary). The emotions that were rated after reading the vignette comprised to happiness or happiness-related emotions, anger or anger-related emotions, sadness or sadness-related emotions, discomfort or discomfort-related emotions and envy. The results showed that emotional reactions were primarily associated with outcomes rather than equity and fairness. For instance, it was predicted that in conditions where the outcome was worse for oneself
than for the coworker (irrespective of own performance being better or worse in comparison to the coworker), envy would be experienced. However, when the outcomes were the same or better for oneself than for the coworker (regardless of own performance), no experience of envy was expected. This prediction was supported. Still, some emotional reactions indicated that fairness considerations sometimes manifest themselves. Future research is needed to examine the potential trade-off between considerations about outcomes and attention to fairness.