

طردشدگی و عدالت سازمانی

Rejection and Organization Justice

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Abstract

Content analysis of semi-structured interviews with 18 adults about losing an important organizational competition examined how three types of social justice : procedural, distributive, and interactional, affect the experience of rejection. All participants reacted to losing with feeling of sadness, anger, frustration, and a tendency to criticize the decision – makers who chose another competitor. 11 of the 18 participants also withdrew from subsequent competitions. These negative feelings motivated all respondents engage in social comparison with the winner, and use the comparison to judge whether the decision – making process was fair. Social comparisons that led to a judgment of being unfairly treated, or that showed the winner to be less qualified, intensified the respondents' negative feelings towards the judges and retarded recovery from negative feeling and thoughts associated with the rejection or loss. To cope with these negative feelings, participants adopted various psychological and behavior strategies such as finding meaning or benefit in the rejection or loss, and trying other competitions. Persistent negative feelings were related to receiving impolite, disrespectful, or insufficient feedback about competition results. Managerial implications are discussed.

Key words : rejection, organizational justice, competition, negative feelings.

چکیده

به منظور بررسی چگونگی تأثیر عدالت سازمانی شامل عدالت روندی، توزیعی و ارتباطی بر تجربه طردشدگی، به تحلیل محتوای مصاحبه‌های نیمه ساخت یافته با ۱۸ بزرگسال که شکست را در یک رقابت اداری یا سازمانی تجربه کرده بودند، پرداخته شد. واکنش همه مصاحبه‌شوندگان در برابر تجربه شکست با احساسهای غم، خشم، ناکامی و گرایش انتقادآمیز نسبت به داورانی که شرکت‌کننده دیگری را برگزیده بودند همراه بود. همچنین، ۱۱ نفر از شرکت‌کنندگان از شرکت مجدد در رقابت‌های بعدی سازمان مربوطه منصرف شدند. این احساسهای منفی همه مصاحبه‌شوندگان را برانگیخت تا بر اساس مقایسه اجتماعی خود با فرد برنده مسابقه به قضاوت درباره حدّ عادلانه بودن گزینش بپردازند. مقایسه‌های اجتماعی‌ای که به قضاوت در مورد بی‌عدالتی منجر شدند و نشان دادند که صلاحیت فرد منتخب کمتر از شخص بازنده است، تشدید احساسهای منفی نسبت به داوران را در پی داشتند و ترمیم احساسهای منفی و افکار مرتبط با طردشدگی یا شکست را به تأخیر انداختند. برای مقابله با این احساسهای منفی، شرکت‌کنندگان از راهبردهای مختلف روانشناختی و رفتاری مانند جستجوی معنا یا فایده‌ای که می‌توانست بر این شکست مترتب باشد و کوشش به منظور شرکت در رقابت‌های دیگر سود جستند. احساسهای منفی مزمن با رفتارهای اهانت‌آمیز، خشن و بی‌ادبانه داوران و عدم دریافت پاسخوراند کافی درباره نتایج رقابت همراه بود. تلویحات مدیریتی مورد بحث قرار گرفته‌اند.

واژه‌های کلیدی : طردشدگی، عدالت سازمانی، رقابت، احساسهای منفی.

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Introduction

When organizations and institutions hold competitions for jobs, promotions, academic opportunities, or other scarce resources, many competitors will be rejected, some of whom are likely to be at least as qualified as the winners. What are the psychological consequences of this form of rejection? Can organizations and institutions do anything to limit the negative consequences?

Rejection, like loss, is a prominent source and can be accompanied by feelings of frustration, anger, sadness, or depression (Davis, Nollen-Hokesma, & Larson, 1998). The perception of being unjustly by organizations or institutions, as well, is frustrating and causes stress, anger, aggression, or withdrawal (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999a). On the other hand, the perception of being treated fairly by organizations or institutions, called organizational justice, is a key factor in reducing the length and severity of distress following rejection or loss (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999b).

Researches have studied at least three types of justice in organizations and institutions. The first, called *distributive justice*, is concerned with the relationships between people's efforts for an organization and the rewards they receive from that institution (Adams, 1965). It is exemplified by the phrase "equal pay for work of equal value". The second type of justice, called procedural justice, refers to the fairness of decision-making procedures for distributing rewards (Leventhal, Karuza & Fry, 1980; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Examples include procedures for evaluating

applicants for jobs or employees for promotion or salary increase. Finally, interactional justice refers to the completeness, honesty, fairness, respect or empathy in the communications organizations have with people, including their employees. Examples include listening to people's concerns, providing adequate explanations for decisions, and empathizing with people's difficulties (Bies, 1986).

Adams (1965) suggests if people receive unequal outcomes in response to equal inputs, those with disproportionately low outcomes experience inequity, bringing feelings of anger, disgust, and revenge. Folger (1993) believes that people develop cognitive standards and reference points for evaluating their treatment or rewards. These cognitive standards may be based on past events, referent others, or other things. If the evaluated level of outcome or reward seems lower than the cognitive standard, people will experience a sense of deprivation or dissatisfaction and might respond by negative feelings such as resentments and anger, or by destructive behaviors. In any experience, if people's cognitive standards show that a situation is less rewarding than a previous one, it could be experienced as a loss, and the unfairness of the loss could mediate people's negative reactions such as anger, frustration, or resentment (Folger, 1993).

Homans (1961) suggests that when people have a lower status than a powerful unjust person, they try to restore justice indirectly by the behaviors against the powerful person.

Organizational research supports Homans' claim. When there is perception that the deci-

sions or actions of institutional adjudicators' are unfair, employees experience anger and the motivation for revenge (Bies, 1986; Floger, 1993; Greenberg, 1990; Sheppard, Lewicki & Minton, 1992). However, research also shows that perceptions of with the plans made by decision-makers (Skarlicki & Latham, 1996, 1997). Even in a time of organizational downsizing or change, a sense of fair treatment or procedural justice helps people develop or maintain favorable attitudes toward the institution (Cobb, Wooten & Floger, 1995).

Research suggests that managers who treat people with respect and dignity (i. e., interactional justice), even in conditions of adversity, motivate attitudes and behaviors in employees that are helpful for the success of plans in the organizations or institutions (Cobb et al., 1995). Bensimon (1994) reports that the violence of employees in the time of downsizing that was not due to a change in their status or job, but to a feeling that they were treated in a humiliating manner. Schweiger and DeNisi (1991) show that a complete, adequate, and sincere explanation of the positive and negative outcomes of a corporate merger reduced people's uncertainly and negative feelings and improved their ability to adjust to their new situation in the organization. These researchers suggest if people understand the process, even those who dislike the outcome of a decision made by an organization or institution would be less dissatisfied than they might otherwise be. Schweiger and DeNisi advise organizations and institutions to communicate what they know and assure people that they

will never be intentionally deceived. Organizations and institutions should offer to answer questions and even to explain why some questions cannot be answered (Ivancevish & Matteson, 1980; Ivancevish, Schweiger & Power, 1987). Moreover, statements such as "we are doing our best; we make mistakes" are helpful in acknowledging possible errors (Cobb et al., 1995) and communicating that the organization is trustworthy and caring (Meglino, DeNisi, Youngblood, Williams, 1988).

Folger & Skarlicki (1999b) suggest that a fair organization or institution should combine different forms of justice to relieve distress. This proposition is supported by the results of a study in an organization faced with several layoffs (Kilbourne, O'Leary-Kelly, Woodman & Wilkerson, 1997). Three forms of justice were implemented during the layoffs : implementing a fair reward system, establishing fair human resource programs, and providing employees with information about the companies perspective, strategies, and goals about organizational change throughout the layoff. Results showed that, despite the layoffs and restructuring, peoples' satisfaction and performance increased. Kilbourne et al. (1997) suggest that it is the interaction of various features of justice in organization, rather than specific features of fairness, that relieves distress of organizational decisions.

In this paper, we show how a perception of being unfairly treated in a competition mediates negative feelings resulting from losing the competition. We propose that perceived justice/injustice, as compared to per-

ceived severity of loss due to a rejection, can be a more powerful mediator of feelings of anger, frustration, and resentment. As a result, we suggest negative feelings resulting from losing an important competition that used a procedure perceived to be fair will subside more quickly than negative feelings resulting from losing a competition that used a procedure perceived to be unfair. From this perspective, it is the perception of injustice that results in deep and frustrating negative feelings, rather than the experience of rejection or loss itself. To explore this idea, we adopt a phenomenological perspective, using qualitative research methods to analyze the contents of interviews with people who lost a competition in various organizations and institutions.

Methods

Respondents

Semi-structured interview were conducted with 18 people, 5 male and 13 female adults between 22 and 65 years old. The level of education of respondents ranged from undergraduate university student to PhD. Respondents had a variety of careers, including housewife, teacher, university student, professor, researcher, and principal of a high school. They were born in different countries including Canada, China, the Philippines, and Iran. Respondents were interviewed by one of six PhD students, two males and four females, as part of a graduate course in qualitative research methods. Each interviewer three respondents.

The Questionnaire

The interviewers developed the interview questions. Respondents were asked to recall an important competition in their life that they lost, describe that it was, how they learned about it, when and where it occurred, and why s/he decided to participate. They were also asked to describe and comment upon their preparation for the competition (when s/he began, how s/he prepared, who assisted her/him, what s/he felt about chances of winnings as s/he prepared) and their participation (what happened at the competition, how long s/he waited for the results and what s/he felt during that time, how s/he learned of the results, what s/he were told, what others said to her/him); respondents were then asked about their first and later reactions (how s/he felt when s/he first learned about losing the competition, why s/he thought s/he lost, how her/his thoughts or feelings about the rejection change over time, how long the changes took, what caused her/his thoughts and feelings to change or not to change). Finally, respondents were asked about the lessons they learned from the experience and advice (if s/he learned anything from the experience, if s/he since applied for or participated in similar competitions, if so what have been the results and her/his reactions) and the advice s/he would give for improving the competition (what would s/he advise future participants in similar contests to do and what, if anything, would s/he advise competition organizers to do to improve their competition).

Procedure

The interviews were conducted in quiet locations that were most convenient for respondents. The locations included classrooms, an interviewer's home, a car, offices, and laboratories. Interviews lasted from 20 to 47 minutes, and were tape-recorded. Each interviewer prepared a transcript interview for distribution to the other five interviewers. Four of the researchers made additional notes during the interviews. These were also circulated to all interviewers.

Before respondents were recruited, we obtained the required approval of the Psychology Department ethics committee of Carleton University. The prospective respondents were then contacted, informed of the interview topic, and asked to participate; no one refused. Participants were given the required informed consent form to read and sign before the interview. The general order of interview questions was followed by all interviewers, but follow-up questions were sometimes asked to clarify persons or points raised in a respondent's story. Each interview was summarized in a coding sheet template. As a result, the six interviewers followed the same interview procedure and reported results in the same format.

Results

To explore the relationship between peoples' perception of organizational injustice, during the competition they lost, and their reactions to losing, we first listened to each

interview from the beginning to the end. The readings allowed us to locate sections of each respondent's answers that were relevant to issues of justice and reactions, and to understand the contexts in which these sections appeared. In order to make the data easier to analyze, we then categorized the answers according to the questions provided in the coding sheet template format. Then we compared categorized and coded quotations of different people. The following themes emerged.

The experience of losing an important contest among all respondents was immediately accompanied by feelings of sadness, anger and frustration, and by criticism of the adjudicators who chose another applicant. Eleven of 18 respondents withdrew from, or decided not to participate in, at least one competition within a week after the rejection. The words of one respondent, a 64-year-old woman who had lost a speech competition, exemplify what respondents felt when they lost :

"I think soon after losing, peoples' feelings are negative. Mine was too. I was frustrated because I thought of all the nights that I had not slept to prepare for the competition, and all the efforts I had made rehearsing or the long times that I had spent in the library. They were all thrown to the wind".

Theses negative feelings motivated all respondents to engage in social comparison between themselves and the winner, and to use the comparison to judge whether the decision-making process was fair. In all the situations, social comparison seemed to be an essential part of a person's response. A 33-year-old

female respondent, a research analyst who had applied for a position in a university, described her situation in this way :

“At first I felt disappointed that I didn’t get the job. Then I felt mad and wanted to know why the University chose the person they did. So, I went on the web to see who they selected, and I did the same for all the competitions I have been in”.

Social comparisons that lead to a perception of being unfairly treated were shown to amplify negative feelings, confining people in a vicious circle (i. e., negative feelings motivated social comparisons which, when seen as invidious, created more negative feelings). A 57-year-old male PhD student, who has been a high school teacher and had applied for an administrative position that was given to somebody else, did a social comparison in this way :

“I was angered by the results and I lost sleep over it because I thought it was a dirty trick. I was sure that, compared to the person who got the position, I deserved the job more. But the school principal did not give it to me. I know the principal considers himself as a good person and by his decision the principal felt guilty. The principle told me why he made his decision so that I would bless him for it. This made me anger. When I went through the process of complaining, and I received the letter saying they agreed I deserved the job more than the person who received it, I became angrier. I know very well the person who got the position. He is a nice person and a good teacher, but not a good manager. Even months later, when the principal made me head of

department, the other man was still an assistant head, and I was still resentful. There were other people in our competition that, for various reasons, would have been acceptable to me if they had got the job. For example, some of them had been working on the board of assistant principals longer than I did, and some had a high level of skills. Therefore, I wrote a letter to the director of education and complained about what had happened”.

The interviews also revealed that all 18 respondents adopted one or more coping strategies to overcome negative feelings involved with their rejection. Twelve respondents reported finding a meaning or benefit in the rejection, by stating lessons learned for the next competition, by thinking of the rejection as a stimulant for reconsidering values or priorities, by increasing patience, or by noting that many of life’s events are out of personal control. Nine eventually tried other competitions as compensation for the rejection or loss. Below is an example of a 22-year-old Ottawa female who was rejected from graduate school at McGill University in Montreal and simultaneously adopted some of these coping strategies.

“The first week, I was really depressed; then I thought I could stay in Ottawa and do a MA in Carleton; then I decided to go to Montreal anyway. After I decided to go to Montreal, I started feeling better, as I felt at least I could live in Montreal. After a couple of weeks I started questioning whether I really wanted to go to McGill or it was just a prestige of the school; McGill is great but it also is very sterile

and I might be happier at Concordia with a smaller department, friendlier people, etc ... If I was accepted, I wouldn't have a chance to complete my French course that really is helping me now. I got also to participate in the drama class in my senior year. It was also easier to stand out among the regular students than among the elite and that also gave me a lot of opportunities at my new school”.

A perception of fairness of the outcomes or the process of decision-making by the organizations that rejected the respondent helps people overcome the negative feelings involved with the experience of rejection. This was evident in the words of a 44-year-old woman who was rejected for a Masters program.

At first I was disappointed. My sons were shocked. I accepted the reality very soon, perhaps after two weeks... I do not have a bad feeling that I was rejected any more because I think other students who were accepted instead of me are more capable than me and deserve to enter the program more than I deserve. I think they were eligible to enter the program and it was their right to go to the university instead of me. Therefore I am not mad at those who rejected me”.

But 10 people who believed they had been treated unfairly found it very difficult to overcome negative feelings or judgments about their rejection. The 64-year-old woman, who talked about her experience losing a competition that had happened 30 years ago, was almost crying when she spoke of the adjudicators. “I was very broken hearted, I was frustrated; because I thought they were not impar-

tial; they were biased”.

A 40-year-old female who six years ago applied for a temporary promotion in the Federal Civil Service still seemed unable to recover from negative feelings associated with her rejection. She talked angrily about the experience of not getting the job, and most of her words were related to unjustness of the competition.

“I thought Wow, that job is exactly for me! When I found out I didn't get the competition, it was like a double slap in the face. I was quite angry actually ... I felt that it was very unfair. ... I was angry he [the adjudicator] did a lot of things that were very selfish. ... Oh, I cried. I was so upset. It was very humiliating. Oh, yes, after that I said to myself, ‘I've been humiliated, put down”.

Even those who have a positive experience in an unjust process do not necessarily develop good feelings about what they have gained. A man speaking about his experience of refusal in a position in 25 years ago, still seemed irritated and showed anger when recalled his experience with rejection. He said :

“I did a good interview but again I was not offered the job. I got the next job that came up because my manager told his boss that I had been number one in two lists, and suggested that he offer the next job to me. But this was also a source of bad feelings. I felt I got the job because I was on the boss' insider list, and everybody in the department I supervised thought I became their boss because the old boy's network was the only way of getting promoted”.

Thirteen respondents said they expected polite and honest feedback in order to feel that their dignity was respected (i. e., expected interactional justice) and that the feedback would not damage their self-esteem. Six respondents were annoyed by the feedback they received. A 35-year-old employee who had applied for another job in the previous year said, "The letter of rejection was written so badly, punitively; I remember ripping it up right after getting it. I felt quite angry after reading the letter and called them a few names. Then, after about a day, I felt more relieved, because I thought about not compromising my standards ... I wasn't devastated by not getting the job. I was just angry at the letter". Another respondent advised the organizations and institutions to "Communicate with candidates and inform them of what happened. Candidates should be told what their competitors had that they didn't have so that the candidates would know how to grow or what to do better next time".

The 40-year-old female who was rejected for a position emphasized that all people who apply for jobs deserve the employer's respect, and suggested that employers give thoughtful feedback to the employees because, "Even if the job looks good, even if the pay is better, you could be very unhappy working with people who do not respect employees. Since becoming a manager, I have selected about 8 new staff through competitions. I'm careful to be fair, to be honest about the job and telling applicants what to expect. People have a right to know what is happening. If they are rejected,

they want to find out their weaknesses and how to improve next time".

Discussion

In order to determine how procedural, distributive, and interactional justice affects experiences of rejection or loss, we analyzed the content of interviews with 18 adults about losing an important competition. The results show when people think they have been rejected unfairly, believing that the decision makers have been biased or accepted those who are less qualified, then the people do not easily recover from negative feelings and thoughts associated with rejection. The results support the importance of procedural justice (Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), and Folger and Sharlicki's (1999b) argument that unfair procedures leading to adverse outcomes motivate negative feelings and opposition against the decision-maker.

Our findings also illustrate the importance of distributive justice and equity in social settings (Adams, 1965). Adams suggests if people receive less than they believe they deserve, they first feel disgusted then feel anger, attacking those unfairly rewarded or those making the decision or withdrawing to resolve their feelings (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999a). We found evidence for these reactions to perceived inequity in our study. Bad feelings resulting from perceived injustice do not disappear in a day or week or month. Many of the feelings last several years.

Other findings from this study show that

people who lose competitions are more negatively affected when they do not receive sufficient feedback from organizations or institutions about the reasons why they have been rejected. Polite and respectful feedback also influenced long-term feelings. These findings support Folger's (1993) thesis that interactional justice, which includes treating people with respect and dignity, listening to their concern, and providing adequate explanations for decisions, increase favorable feelings and attitudes.

We should note some important practical implications of our study. If organizations or institutions conduct competitions for employment or promotion, they are well advised to pay attention to the feelings of those whom they reject. It is too easy, and arguably irresponsible, to ignore what happens to those who are rejected. Many of them are likely to be just as qualified as the winners, and many are likely to play some future role in the organization. If each competition creates several rejected applicants who remain bitter and angry for years after their rejection, the organization or the whole society will soon accumulate large numbers of them. Some of the most talented rejects will leave. Some will never compete again. Some will remain in their positions but with no motivation to work hard for the good of the organization. Morale will suffer. Productivity will decline. The organization will become dysfunctional and inefficient.

How can organizations and institutions minimize these toxic consequences of losing competitors? Perhaps the easiest way is to learn how to conduct fair and open compe-

titions and how to communicate the results of the competitions in a respectful way. As our study illustrates, feelings of loss or rejection are ephemeral, but feelings of injustice are long lasting and harmful. Organizations and institutions that take the time and make the effort to conduct fair and open competitions will flourish. Organizations and institutions that pay no attention to the justice of their competitions, for example, institutions that accept applicants or organizations that hire and promote according to friendships or an old-boy's network, will not.

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