

## Abstract

Existing theories emphasize that when people evaluate the justice of an outcome, they have to rely on the outcome of others as a referent to contrast with that of their own (e.g., Adam, 1965; Messick & Sentis, 1983). This thesis highlights a supplementary view that even when people do not know the outcome of others, they can mentally generate a referent for outcome evaluations. Integrating ideas from counterfactual thinking and justice research on outcome evaluation, I propose that an outcome would be perceived as unjust when it evokes imagined outcomes (counterfactuals) that are better than actuality. This premise was verified with respect to two important issues in the counterfactual thinking process namely, the availability of counterfactual alternatives and the direction of counterfactual construction.

Temporal distance and action-inaction are two determinants of the availability of counterfactuals (Kahneman & Miller, 1986). The first part of this thesis examined the effects of these two factors on outcome evaluations. Study 1 showed that participants regarded the outcome of being rejected from a competition as more unjust when their proposals had missed the submission deadline by merely a day (short temporal distance) than when they had missed the deadline by six days (long temporal distance). Study 2 extended Study 1 and demonstrated that the effect of temporal distance was qualified by whether the panel had ever extended the deadline (action) or not (inaction). When the panel had previously extended the deadline, the data replicated Study 1's findings, i.e., the outcome was perceived as more unjust when the missed deadline was temporally close than when it was temporally far. In contrast, when the panel had never changed the deadline, there was no significant difference in the perceived justice of the outcome between the two temporal distance conditions. These results suggest that the more strongly an outcome induces a person to generate counterfactual

alternatives (counterfactuals are made more available), the more likely that it would be perceived as unjust.

The second part of this thesis studied the effect of the direction of counterfactual construction on the perceived justice of an outcome. In Study 3a, participants perceived the outcome of being forbidden from boarding a plane as less unjust when it evokes evaluatively worse alternatives (downward counterfactuals) than when it evokes evaluatively better alternatives (upward counterfactuals). The same results were found in Study 3b. These results imply that the same outcome would be perceived as less unjust when it triggers counterfactuals around worse alternatives rather than better alternatives.