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Anger and fear in decision-making: The case of film directors on set

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Summary Anger and fear are frequently felt and impactful workplace emotions, especially in times of crisis when critical decisions need to be made. An important question is how these emotions might influence decision makers' depth of processing: whether when feeling angry or fearful decision-makers engage in more conscious and analytical rational decision making, or less-conscious and heuristic intuitive decision making. To date research on the effect of these strong emotions has been limited to laboratory studies where the complexity and pressures of real-world managerial decisions are absent, and focused on generalized mood rather than on direct emotional experience. This study asks two research questions: Do anger and fear facilitate the use of intuitive or rational decision-making? And what is the impact of these emotions on decision effectiveness? We examine these phenomena in the crisis-laden field setting of film directors actively engaged in directing motion pictures. Data were gathered by shadowing and interviewing seven film directors. A qualitative analysis of the video and audio transcripts revealed that film directors engage in two types of intuitive decision-making, based on whether the decision was driven by expertise or personal emotional experience. Rational decision-making occurred when directors, driven by feelings of moderate fear and little previous experience with a situation, relied on a more conscious, deliberative decision-making process. Four types of decision effectiveness are identified: task, personal, growth, and leadership. The implications of emotion-driven decision-making on each of these types of effectiveness are explored.
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Introduction

Long gone is the time when researchers assumed that emotions played no role in decision-making (e.g., Von Neuman & Morgenstern, 1944). Since Simon (1955,1968) first critiqued the rational decision-making paradigm, numerous studies have shown the importance of emotions in decision-making (for reviews, see Damasio, 1998; Forgas, 1995; Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003). Neurobiological studies, for instance, have shown that it is impossible for people to make simple decisions when regions of the brain associated with emotion have been damaged (Damasio, 1998; Lieberman, 2000).

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One particular question that decision-making researchers have examined is how affect influences depth of processing; that is, whether people engage in systematic processing (rational decision-making) or heuristic processing (intuitive decision-making). By and large, studies on this topic have shown that when people are in a good mood they are more likely to engage in intuitive decision-making (Bolte, Goschke, & Kuhl, 2003; Isen, 2000; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), whereas when they are in a bad mood they are more likely to engage in rational decision-making (Elsbach & Barr, 1999; Staw & Barsade, 1993).

While these results are important, they do not specify how specific emotions influence the type of decision processing (rational or intuitive) in which an individual engages. This question is critical because other studies of emotion and decision-making have shown that emotions of the same valence (e.g., anger and sadness) can have quite different effects on decision-making (e.g., Keltner, Ellsworth, & Edwards, 1993), calling for the need for studies that go beyond mere valence effects when studying how affect influences decision-making (Lerner & Keltner, 2000).

To answer this call, this study explores the relationship between two discrete negative emotions, anger and fear, on decision-making. More specifically, we explore two questions. (1) Do the emotions of anger and fear facilitate the use of intuitive or rational decision-making? And, (2) What is the impact of anger and fear on decision-making effectiveness? We investigate these questions in the crisis-laden field setting of movie directors making decisions on set.

We focus on the emotions of anger and fear for several reasons. First, anger and fear are ubiquitous in both everyday life and work settings, and thought to affect decision-making (Averill, 1982; Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009; Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Pekrun & Friese, 1992). Second, studies of ''basic'' emotions have shown that they are among the most easily identifiable emotions in people's faces, gestures, and language (Ekman, 1994; Scherer, 1986). Finally, anger and fear naturally emerged as the most commonly occurring emotions in our setting. While we originally set out to study a variety of emotions in relation to decision-making, analysis of our data revealed that anger and fear occurred in 71% of all of our cases. We therefore decided to restrict our study to these two emotions.

We chose to investigate our question in a field setting first because the majority of studies on the role of affect in decision-making have been laboratory experiments, where time pressure and stakes are low, personal investment in decisions is imaginary, and the decision-making processes and outcomes studied are simple. This contrasts with the more complex real-world decision-making processes in which managers actually engage (Lipshitz, Klein, Orasanu, & Salas, 2001), where affect may be found to have a different effect on decision-making than in the laboratory. For instance, the majority of laboratory experiments have found that when in a good mood subjects tend to perform better on creative tasks (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987; Isen, Johnson, Mertz, & Robinson, 1985) associated with intuitive processing (Agor, 1991; Lubart & Getz, 1997). However, in their field study of an organizational unit charged with developing creative designs, George and Zhou (2002) found that negative, rather than positive, mood facilitated on-the-job creativity in the unit they studied. In addition to these mixed results, researchers studying the decision-making of experts have expressed doubt that laboratory results can be generalized to contexts characterized by ''ill-structured problems, uncertain, dynamic environments, shifting, ill-defined, or competing goals, multiple event-feedback loops, time constraints, [and] high stakes'' (Lipshitz et al., 2001: 334).

A second reason motivating us to investigate our questions in a field setting is that most existing studies on affect and decision-making have examined the influence of incidental rather than direct emotions on cognition. This research typically examines the effects of moods or emotions generated in one setting on cognitive processes in another setting. In intuition studies, for example, participants are induced to feel positive or negative affect and then given a task in which their depth of processing can be inferred (Tiedens & Linton, 2001). However, measuring the influence of incidental emotion (emotion not related to the cognitive processing task that is presented) is not the same as measuring the effects of direct emotion (emotion that is relevant to participants, the situation they face, and the target of their expressed emotion). This is particularly important in situations likely to foster intuitive thinking, since theory suggests that intuitive processes involve affectively-charged situations and emotional neural pathways (Dane & Pratt, 2007). We thus investigate our topic in a naturalistic rather than a laboratory setting. We examine the influence on decision making of emotions specifically generated by the situation of directing actors on a movie set. While the effects of anger and sadness on decision-making have been compared in laboratory studies, to our knowledge, no studies have compared and contrasted the effects of anger and fear on depth of processing, particularly in a field setting. We place our study within a growing tradition of qualitative studies of decision making in field settings, such as Hensman and Sadler-Smith (2011), Lipshitz and Shulimovitz (2007), Woiceshyn (2009), and Sadler-Smith and Shefy (2004).

Theoretical background

Definitions

Dual-processing theory: rational and intuitive decision-making

A number of psychologists have come to accept the notion of ''dual-processing'' in decision making (Adolphs, Tranel, & Damasio, 2003; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Damasio, 1998; Epstein, 1998; Kahneman, 2003; Kihlstrom, 1987; Loewenstein, 1996). Dual-processing is the idea that people process information with two distinct systems: a primary information processing system associated with intuition, and a secondary information processing system associated with reasoning (see summary in Salas, Rosen, & DiazGranados, 2010).

The primary system has been characterized as fast, occurring outside of awareness, relying upon associations, holistic and synthetic, affect-laden, vivid, value-based, relying upon narratives, symbols, images and metaphors, based on experiential and tacit knowledge, relatively less intentional and effortful, and slow-learning (Agor, 1991;