



The interactive effect of positive inequity and regulatory focus on work performance[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We studied reactions to two forms of positive inequity: overpayment and having a job.
- Participants' regulatory focus affected their reactions to positive inequity.
- Positive inequity led to higher performance for promotion than prevention people.
- The results contribute to the literatures on positive inequity and regulatory focus.

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined how the work performance of promotion-focused people and prevention-focused people was affected by two different forms of positive inequity: overpayment and having a job. After completing an initial task, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: (1) an Overpayment condition in which participants were told that they would receive greater payment than the other participant (who was actually a confederate) for doing the same work, (2) a Having a Job condition in which participants were assigned to have a job while the other participant (the confederate) was dismissed prematurely without compensation, and (3) a Control condition in which participants and the confederate were treated equitably. Relative to their prevention-focused counterparts, promotion-focused participants performed better in both the Overpayment and Having a Job conditions than in the Control condition. Theoretical implications are discussed.

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Introduction

How people respond to distributive justice has long been a topic of interest to social and organizational psychologists (e.g., Adams, 1965). A prominent distributive justice framework, equity theory, considers how people are affected by the relationship between their outcomes and inputs and the corresponding relationship for the target of comparison, often consisting of co-workers. Inequity is experienced when the outcome/input relationship for the self is less than or greater than that of the comparison other (i.e., negative inequity and positive inequity, respectively). Of these two forms of inequity, researchers have focused more on negative inequity, even though positive inequity is not infrequent and people's reactions to it are theoretically and practically significant (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978).

Positive inequity can elicit conflicting experiences (Messick & Sentis, 1983; Peters, Van den Bos, & Karremans, 2008; Van den Bos, Peters, Bobocel, & Ybema, 2006). On the one hand, from a justice perspective, people feel uncomfortable about outcomes deviating from equity. On the other hand, from a hedonic perspective, people are pleased to be beneficiaries of favorable outcomes (cf. Van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1997; Van den Bos, Wilke, Lind, & Vermunt, 1998). An intriguing prediction of equity theory is that people may work harder in response to receiving positively inequitable than equitable outcomes.

However, the results of prior research are limited in two respects. First, researchers often examine attitudinal reactions (e.g., satisfaction) rather than behavioral reactions (e.g., work performance). Second, the findings have been inconsistent. Some studies showed that people are dissatisfied when they experience positive inequity and may work harder, whereas others found that any feelings of dissatisfaction are rationalized away fairly quickly (Lawler, 1968; Walster et al., 1978).

Given the shortcomings of prior studies on people's reactions to positive inequity, further research is clearly needed. By delineating when positive inequity has a greater impact on work performance, we can better explain why positive inequity affects people in the way that

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it does; moreover, our understanding of positive inequity may be advanced by examining behavioral rather than merely attitudinal reactions.

The current study was designed to examine the interactive effect of positive inequity and regulatory focus on work performance. We posit that people may vary in their reactions to positive inequity. In particular, individual differences in regulatory focus may moderate the relationship between positive inequity and performance. Furthermore, we examined positive inequity in two different forms: overpayment (e.g., Adams & Rosenbaum, 1962; Van den Bos et al., 2006), and having a job when others are unemployed (Bianchi, 2013; Brockner, Davy, & Carter, 1985). If individual differences in regulatory focus elicit similar reactions to these two different forms of positive inequity, then we gain increased confidence in the construct validity and external validity of the findings.

Positive inequity in response to overpayment and having a job

When positive inequity takes the form of being overpaid, the outcome/input relationship for the self is greater than the relationship for the comparison other due to an increase in outcome for the self. In previous research overpayment has been operationalized by giving participants undeservedly high pay (e.g., Van den Bos et al., 2006). When positive inequity takes the form of having a job when co-workers do not, the outcome/input relationship for the self becomes greater than the relationship for the comparison other due to a decrease in outcome for the comparison other. For instance, participants experienced positive inequity when they observed a fellow participant (who was actually a confederate) be “laid off” midway through without receiving compensation (e.g., Brockner et al., 1985).

How do individuals conceptualize these two different forms of positive inequity? In both instances the other's experience is likely to reflect a counterfactual of what could have happened to the self, and thereby serves as a reference point. Moreover, in both instances the self is (undeservedly) better off than the comparison other. That is, a positive outcome is present (gain) for the self but is absent (non-gain) for the other. If the other's outcome serves as a reference point and if the self is better off than the other, then the values that participants may assign to the other's and to their own outcome are akin to “0” and “+1,” respectively. And, if that is the case, the question then becomes how will individuals react to events perceived to reside between “0” and “+1”. Regulatory focus theory provides an answer to this question.

Positive inequity and regulatory focus

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) distinguishes between two kinds of motivation systems. People who are promotion-focused have strong needs for nurturance and accomplishment, strive to attain hopes and aspirations (“ideals”), care about advancing from the status quo (“0”) to a better state (“+1”), and are sensitive to the presence or absence of positive outcomes (“gains and non-gains”). In contrast, people who are prevention-focused have strong needs for security and safety, strive to fulfill duties and obligations (“oughts”), care about maintaining the status quo (“0”) and avoiding a worse state (“–1”), and are sensitive to the presence or absence of negative outcomes (“losses and non-losses”).

When people's regulatory focus tendency is congruent with the event they are experiencing, they tend to show more attention to and better memory of the event (e.g., Higgins & Silberman, 1998), more intense emotions (e.g., Idson, Liberman, & Higgins, 2000), and greater motivation (Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998). For instance, Shah et al. (1998) found that when the framing of the task incentive was congruent with participants' dispositional regulatory focus participants were more motivated and performed better than when the task framing was incongruent with participants' dispositional regulatory focus.

This congruence effect led us to predict differing reactions of promotion-focused and prevention-focused people to positive inequity. In positive inequity situations (i.e., overpayment and having a job) the self is better off than the comparison other. Relative to the reference point set by the other's outcome (being equitably paid; being unemployed), the presence of a positive outcome (being overpaid; having a job) may be experienced as a “+1” for the self, which fits the regulatory orientation of promotion-focused people. That is, the difference in the reward value between “0” and “+1” is greater for promotion-focused than for prevention-focused people (Zou, Scholer, & Higgins, 2014). Thus, we predict an interaction effect between regulatory focus and experimental condition on performance: compared to prevention-focused people, promotion-focused people should be more motivated to work hard in the Overpayment and Having a Job conditions than in the Control condition.

Method

Participants

Ninety-four undergraduate students at a university in the northeastern United States completed the experiment. They were selected from a larger group of students who had completed the 11-item Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ, Higgins et al., 2001) online a week earlier. The RFQ measures chronic individual difference in prevention and promotion focus. In order to give our hypothesis a strong test, we followed the approach used in many previous studies (e.g., Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994; Higgins & Tykocinski, 1992; Semin, Higgins, de Montes, Estourget, & Valencia, 2005) of examining people who were more purely promotion-focused (those who scored above the mean in promotion and below the mean in prevention) and people who were more purely prevention-focused (those who scored above the mean in prevention and below the mean in promotion).

Procedure and measures

The experiment was conducted in a laboratory that had two separate, small rooms and a common space outside them. Upon entering the lab, the participant was seated at a table in the common space. After about 30 s another “participant,” who was actually the confederate, entered and was seated. The experimenter gave both the participant and the confederate the consent form, which indicated that the going rate of payment was seven dollars for approximately 30 min. The experimenter informed participants that they would work on a proofreading task, have a short break, work on a second proofreading task, and fill out a survey at the end. The experimenter then handed out the instruction for the “Test Validation Study”, which read as follows:

We are attempting to develop some standardized tests of intellectual and cognitive performance. We are establishing some baseline norms on how people do under neutral circumstances so that later on, when we run various testing procedures, we'll have an idea of just how much effect they have had. These standardized tests will be very useful in the future. In particular, we expect to be able to apply them to working situations to measure the aptitude and performance of paid employees. The task that you will be working on today is a measure of proofreading ability. We would like to get some idea of the quality and quantity of proofreading under typical conditions. ... You will have exactly seven minutes to proofread.

To “minimize competition and distraction,” the participant and the confederate were told that they were going to do the proofreading in private rooms. The experimenter ushered the confederate into one room and then led the participant into another room. The proofreading materials were those used in previous research (e.g., Brockner et al., 1985). Both the confederate and the participant were given hard copies

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