

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Outcome Bias in Decision Evaluation

Baron, J. and Hershey, J. (1988). "Outcome Bias in Decision Evaluation." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54(4): 569-579.

Key Words: Decision making, outcome bias,

Summary/Conclusions

In five different experiments, researchers explored how individuals judged the quality of decisions. The experiments used common scenarios. Individuals were provided with facts and outcomes of decisions that were made. According to the study, people rated the quality of thinking better, the decision maker as more competent, and were more likely to trust the decision maker when previous decisions had a positive outcome. Bias was found to be present even when circumstances were adjusted.

Limitations of Information

The experiments contained small sample sizes. In the study was limited to decisions and outcomes related to medical and gambling scenarios. People were asked to evaluate others' decision making, it is unclear if people would have evaluated their own decisions differently. Data was collected from questionnaires, which does not provide additional details related to rationale.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Trust the process not the product

Decision making, trust, and thought processes continue to intrigue researchers. The current study examined how individuals evaluate the decisions of others. Researchers conducted 5 separate experiments asking undergraduate students to evaluate decisions related to fictional scenarios.

Using several fictional scenarios researchers asked undergraduate students to complete a questionnaire evaluating others decision making. All the scenarios used in the study were pertaining to medical decisions or monetary gambling decisions. The scenarios were constructed to isolate attributes that could sway the students' evaluation of the decision. Some scenarios displayed thoughtful decision-making but others were more random. The scenarios were varied between positive and negative outcomes. This would allow the researchers to examine what factors the students considered when evaluating decisions.

In all five experiments, researchers found that the outcome was the factor attributed to quality decision making. The experiments highlighted that even when the decision maker made a decision based on chance or luck, individuals still take the outcome into account when evaluating decisions. Interestingly even when individuals stated that the outcome should not have factored into the quality of the decision, they still showed a bias toward the decisions with positive outcomes. Researchers noted even when individuals understand they show this bias, it continues to persist.

While the study did not test whether individuals would evaluate their decisions in a similar fashion, researchers cited other studies that suggest that individuals may hold themselves responsible for both good and bad outcomes beyond their control.

Practical Applications for Probation Officers:

- ✓ When a negative outcome occurs, like a new crime, evaluate the process of the decisions instead of evaluating the decisions based upon the negative outcome.
- ✓ Instead of assuming probationers knew all the details prior to a decision resulting in a violation behavior, ask them what they knew before making a decision.
- ✓ When the outcome of a decision is considered to be the result of luck (e.g. passing a test), help probationers re-analyze the decision to determine how another action (e.g. better study prep) could have produced a better result.

Practical Applications for the Workplace:

- ✓ When staffing cases or working through case reviews, consider the information known at the time of a decision before providing feedback regarding decisions.
- ✓ Ask about the details of how individuals come to decisions. If individuals use general rules to make decisions, try asking about different scenarios to ensure that decisions are not being made only because they have worked in the past with a different situation.