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The Influence of Emotion Perception on Fair Decision-Making in Individuals with High Trait Anxiety: A Moderated Mediation Model

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Abstract

Anxiety influences individuals' social decision-making, and individuals with higher trait anxiety are more likely to accept unfair offers in ultimatum games (UG). However, existing research findings on fair decision-making in individuals with high trait anxiety are inconsistent, and the underlying mechanisms remain largely unclear. The present study aimed to examine fair decision-making in individuals with high trait anxiety and further explore the role of emotion perception in shaping their decision-making processes. A 2 (trait anxiety: high vs. low) $\times$ 3 (distributive fairness: fair vs. disadvantageous unfairness vs. advantageous unfairness) mixed-design experiment was conducted. Twenty-seven individuals with high trait anxiety and 27 control participants completed the experiment. We employed a modified UG to measure fair decision-making and to collect participants' emotional perception ratings of each offer. The results indicated that individuals with high trait anxiety had significantly higher acceptance rates for disadvantageous unfair offers compared to the control group. Moreover, emotion perception mediated the relationship between distributive fairness and acceptance behavior, with this mediating effect being significantly stronger in the control group than in the high trait anxiety group. The association between emotion perception and acceptance decisions was weaker in individuals with high trait anxiety compared to the control group. In summary, individuals with high trait anxiety exhibit an impaired ability to flexibly adjust acceptance behavior based on emotional perception, tend to accept disadvantageous unfairness offers, and may rely more on alternative cognitive or contextual cues in their decision-making.

Keywords: trait anxiety; fair decision-making; emotion perception; ultimatum game; moderated mediation model