Feedback to know, to show, or both? A profile approach to the feedback process

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ABSTRACT

Learners seek feedback on their performance with varying motives. Using a latent profile analysis, we identified three subpopulations of college students with distinct patterns of feedback motives – instrumental isolated, undifferentiated, and instrumental enhancement. These groups differed in achievement goals, regulatory focus, and feedback orientation (Study 1, $N = 563$). In Study 2 ($N = 294$), we replicated the three profile groups and linked them to feedback-seeking behaviors. The instrumental enhancement profile group most frequently sought feedback across types of behaviors (monitoring, inquiry) and sources (peers, instructors). We discuss the implications of our findings for feedback research and practice involving learners in various contexts.

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1. Introduction

Feedback-seeking is an important proactive behavior with broad application to self-regulated learning and performance management (Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Butler & Winne, 1995). Across academic and organizational contexts, feedback – conceptualized here as the information learners receive about their learning processes and achievement outcomes – is an essential part of learning, practice, and skill development (Maurer & Chapman, 2013). Although previous studies have identified feedback and task characteristics that could improve the performance outcomes (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), why learners seek feedback is less understood. Learners may use feedback to reduce the gaps between current and desired level of outcomes (i.e., Hattie & Timperley, 2007), but they might also seek performance feedback to make a positive impression on others (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). The learner who seeks feedback both to impress her instructors or peers and to ensure a high performance outcome is quite different from the learner who has little idea what will happen if she seeks feedback. Using college student samples in the U.S., we examine how learners differ with respect to motives to seek feedback in order to generate a more comprehensive account of the motivational underpinnings of feedback-seeking.

Learners differ in their approach to feedback (Ashford, 1986). Although several taxonomies of feedback motives exist (Anseel,

Lievens, & Levy, 2007; Ashford & Cummings, 1983), the research has not yet recognized the subpopulations of learners who qualitatively differ in patterns of feedback motives. Use of a person-centered approach enables us to investigate this population heterogeneity (Lubke & Muthén, 2005; Marsh, Lüdtke, Trautwein, & Morin, 2009; Wang & Hanges, 2011). We use latent profile analysis in order to identify distinct subpopulations of learners on the basis of combinations of their feedback motives and establish the construct validity of these feedback motive profiles by linking them to relevant motivational orientations (Study 1) and feedback-seeking behavior (Study 2).

1.1. Feedback motives: why learners seek feedback

The proactive seeking of feedback information positively contributes to a variety of individual and organizational experiences including job satisfaction (Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, & Sackett, 2015) and newcomer socialization (Cooper-Thomas, Paterson, Stadler, & Saks, 2014). However, these positive outcomes may not necessarily encompass performance. In a recent meta-analysis, Anseel et al. (2015) concluded that the mean correlation between feedback-seeking and performance is small, thus triggering a call for more research into the intermediate processes linking feedback-seeking and performance. Similarly, findings on the relationship between feedback seeking and academic performance among college students have been mixed (i.e., Hwang & Arbaugh, 2006; Hwang, Kessler, & Francesco, 2004; Wang, Cullen, Yao, & Li, 2013). Myers, Martin, and Mottet (2002) found that college students have varying motives and utilize different information seeking strategies when communicating with their instructors. Thus, when getting information about their own performance, students may be driven by

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different motives that in turn impact subsequent feedback strategies and performance.

In a seminal paper on the feedback process, Ashford and Cummings (1983) developed a tripartite model comprised of instrumental, ego, and image-based motives. They attached primary importance to the *instrumental* motive wherein feedback is sought because it enables goal attainment and uncertainty reduction (Ashford, 1986; Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003; Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Rooted in expectancy theory, the instrumental motive assumes that learners seek feedback because it signals the behaviors that are tied to desirable rewards (e.g., high class marks) and builds the confidence and efficacy needed to perform tasks successfully (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Renn & Fedor, 2001).

The ego and image- based motives identified by Ashford and Cummings (1983) suspend organizational concerns and are aligned with the self. The *ego*-based feedback seeking motive highlights the capacity for feedback to harm the self-concept, thus compromising a learner's ability to regulate a positive self-view. The ego motive has the potential to both encourage feedback seeking to validate or reinforce a favorable self-image (as an *ego-enhancement motive*) and to discourage feedback seeking in order to evade information that is threatening to the self-image (as an *ego-defense motive*). This distinction between ego enhancement and ego defense is consistent with Korman's (2001) theory of work motivation wherein self-enhancement and self-protection are regarded as independent motivational processes. For example, students who feel dejected may deliberately seek positive feedback intended to restore a favorable self-view. In contrast, students can also protect an existing favorable self-view by going out of their way to avoid negative feedback that might threaten that self-perception (Northcraft & Ashford, 1990; Whitaker & Levy, 2012). Although feedback researchers have not reliably distinguished between ego defense and ego enhancement, studying these motives separately may help reconcile the body of conflicting feedback literature on the ego motive.

Finally, Ashford and Cummings's (1983) image-based motive is focused upon the social implications of feedback seeking. Grounded in the theoretical framework of impression management (Morrison & Bies, 1991), the image-based motive drives feedback-seeking wherein the goal is to look good, or, conversely, avoid looking bad. Thus, whereas the ego motive is inward-looking, the image motive is outwardly focused. Active feedback-seeking behavior is a public process wherein other people can observe the results of a feedback request. Consequently, one's public image is a pertinent concern that can motivate feedback choices (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008). Similar to the ego motive, image concerns can both encourage employees to seek feedback to enhance a public image (as an *image enhancement motive*; Morrison & Bies, 1991; Moss, Valenzi, & Taggart, 2003) and to avoid feedback to protect a public image (as an *image defense motive*; e.g., Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Roberson, Deitch, Brief, & Block, 2003; Williams, Miller, Steelman, & Levy, 1999). For example, selectively seeking positive feedback may result in praise that enhances one's social standing. In contrast, one's social standing can also be preserved by avoiding negative feedback or criticism in public. Consistent with Morrison and Bies (1991) and Tuckey, Brewer, and Williamson (2002), we conceptualize image defense and enhancement as separate motives.

In summary, the five motive domains that we seek to examine through our person-centered analysis are the (a) instrumental, (b) ego enhancement, (c) ego defense, (d) image enhancement, and (e) image defense motives. Hays and Williams (2011) inferred the existence of the instrumental, image defense, and ego defense motives from values and costs measures, concluding from the significant interaction between costs and values on feedback-seeking behavior that feedback motives do not operate independently and must be considered jointly. To this end, our use of a person-centered approach enables simultaneous consideration of the multiple motives that reside within learners at varying levels.

We anticipate that three distinct feedback motive profiles will emerge. First, we predict that there will be a subpopulation of learners for whom the instrumental motive is the dominant motive (i.e., the instrumental motive is endorsed at a higher level relative to the other four feedback motives). For these learners, feedback's utility primarily resides in its ability to facilitate the attainment of learning and performance goals (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Such learners are eager to reduce uncertainty (Trope, 1979), particularly when uncertainty levels are high or low as opposed to moderate (Anseel & Lievens, 2007).

Next, we predict that there will be a subpopulation of learners for whom both the instrumental and ego-based motives are endorsed at above average levels. These learners remain sensitive to the role of feedback in reducing uncertainty and enhancing performance, but are also particularly sensitive to the affective costs and benefits of feedback (Jussim, Yen, & Aiello, 1995; Trope & Neter, 1994). Thus, these students seek feedback in service of both their emotional needs and their informational needs (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998). The existence of this feedback motives profile is consistent with idiographic approaches wherein it was observed that multiple motives are at play during any given feedback episode as the immediate affective power of feedback gives rise to its longer-time informational benefits (Trope & Pomerantz, 1998).

Finally, we anticipate that a third subpopulation will emerge wherein learners report relatively low levels of all feedback motives. This third profile is expected to emerge on the basis of the large number of early college students who are not very advanced in their development as self-regulated learners (Pintrich & Zusho, 2002; Yorke, 2000). These novice learners are believed to be less sensitive to the value of feedback and the outcomes of feedback seeking.

Hypothesis 1. Three distinct feedback motive profiles will emerge: 1a) high instrumental motive ("instrumental isolated"), 1b) high instrumental and ego motives, and 1c) low across five motives ("undifferentiated").

1.2. Linking feedback profiles to self-regulatory variables

We seek to validate the feedback motive profiles based on three sets of self-regulatory variables implicated in the learning process: achievement goals, regulatory focus, and feedback orientation. Achievement goals can be conceptualized and operationalized in various fashions, and our focus is upon goal orientation as a dispositional preference for different types of achievement goals (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Elliott and Dweck (1988) proposed that individuals enter achievement situations with two major types of goals: *performance* goals, in which individuals strive to demonstrate their ability to perform well, and *mastery* goals, in which individuals seek to develop their task competence. Elliot and McGregor (2001) proposed a 2×2 model in which mastery and performance goal orientation are crossed with approach and avoidance dimensions. Mastery-approach involves intentions to master a domain of knowledge in order to pursue anticipated positive outcomes, whereas mastery-avoidance involves avoiding anticipated negative outcomes associated with not having mastered the domain of knowledge. Performance-approach and performance-avoidance entail the respective pursuit or avoidance of opportunities to showcase one's competence, or lack thereof. We anticipate that the feedback motive profiles will differ in their achievement goals. Consistent with valuing feedback's implications for goal attainment and skill development (Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999), we predict that the instrumental profile will be highest on the mastery approach and mastery avoid dimensions of goal orientation relative to the other feedback motive profiles. Furthermore, we predict that modest to low scores on all of the achievement goals will characterize the undifferentiated profile as we believe these learners to be the least interested in increasing competence and avoiding negative performance outcomes (Pastor, Barron, Miller, & Davis, 2007).