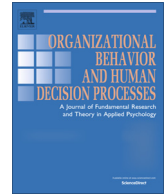




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How beliefs about the self influence perceptions of negative feedback and subsequent effort and learning



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ABSTRACT

Whether individuals believe that ability can change through effort (incremental theorists) or is fixed (entity theorists) influences self-regulation in achievement situations – especially in response to failure. Explaining why past studies have found mixed results, our findings from two experiments suggest that individuals' theory of ability interacts with whether feedback compares their performance to others or to an absolute standard. Further, those who believe or were induced to believe that ability can change through effort found negative absolute feedback highly valuable and relatively unthreatening to their self-concept, which, in turn, was positively associated with effort and learning. In contrast, those who believe or were induced to believe that ability is fixed found themselves in a position of motivational conflict as they perceived negative comparative feedback as valuable but also highly threatening. Perhaps because threat is cognitively consuming, our results suggest that threat inhibited learning.

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1. Introduction

Employees often receive – and expect to receive – feedback about how they can improve their performance. Negative feedback is considered crucial to employee development because it communicates information about where employees should direct their efforts: ideally, employees respond by devoting effort to improving in areas of weakness. Unfortunately, employees' responses to negative feedback can fall short of this ideal: employees often do not respond to negative feedback by directing effort toward improvement – and sometimes even reduce effort in the feedback area (e.g., Belschak & Den Hartog, 2009; Brett & Atwater, 2001).

One reason that negative feedback may have unreliable effects is that it can elicit a complex set of thoughts and feelings. On one hand, employees may perceive negative feedback as a valuable informational resource that can help them achieve their goals (Ashford, 1986), motivating them to work toward self-improvement. On the other hand, employees may perceive negative feedback as threatening (Brunstein, 2000; Trope, Gervy, & Bolger, 2003), motivating them to recover feelings of positive self-worth (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Moreover, employees may experience motivational conflict when they view negative

feedback as both valuable and threatening. In fact, it seems likely that employees would only experience feedback as threatening if the feedback pertained to valued goals.

One of this study's aims is to elucidate the feedback process—to explain what cognitions underlie individuals' responses to negative feedback. We argue that past research and theory has conceptualized feedback and feedback reactions too simplistically: it has often ignored the multiple, sometimes conflicting, motives that feedback makes salient (Alder & Ambrose, 2005; Leung, Su, & Morris, 2001). As such, we examine individuals' perceptions of negative feedback (i.e., perceptions of how valuable and threatening the feedback is) that seem likely to make salient two competing motives – to develop in the feedback area *and* to recover a positive sense of self-worth. We also examine how individuals' perceptions of negative feedback translate to behavioral and learning outcomes—specifically, effort toward learning and learning in the feedback area. Past research has separated perceptions of feedback from behavioral outcomes by focusing on either one or the other (e.g., Lam, Yik, & Schaubroeck, 2002; Smalley & Stake, 1996; Vancouver & Tischner, 2004). We contribute to research and theory on feedback by explaining *why* feedback often fails to result in corrective action: we link feedback characteristics with associated outcomes and show how perceptions underlie the feedback process. By examining where and how much effort individuals devote to learning in the feedback area and how much information they

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recall through that effort, we help to uncover the motivational and cognitive processes that may underlie feedback failures.

This study also aims to clarify the effects of feedback standard for negative feedback—past research has found mixed results regarding the effects of using either a relative (i.e., comparative) or absolute standard (e.g., Atwater & Brett, 2006; Moore & Klein, 2008). We consider whether individuals' implicit theory about the malleability of ability explain these conflicting findings. In doing so, our results contribute to a small but increasing number of studies that examine the influence of implicit theories of ability on work-related outcomes (e.g., Bandura & Wood, 1989; Heslin & Vandewalle, 2011; Heslin, Vandewalle, & Latham, 2006; Taberero & Wood, 1999). We examine whether those with an entity theory (i.e., holding beliefs that human attributes are fixed) respond poorly to some feedback because their concern with preserving feelings of self-worth overrides their concern with using feedback to achieve their goals. In this way, our results are also likely to have practical implications for performance management as they may provide guidance to managers about how to deliver feedback.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

Dweck's social-cognitive model of motivation serves as our theoretical framework. According to this model, individuals vary in their implicit beliefs regarding the malleability of human attributes (also referred to as self-theories or mindsets) (Dweck, 2000; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). At one end of the continuum are entity theorists who believe that human attributes *cannot* be changed; at the other end of the continuum are incremental theorists who believe that human attributes *can* be changed through effort. Implicit theories of ability can refer to specific human attributes such as intelligence, morality, or managerial ability (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Taberero & Wood, 1999) or to ability in general (Dweck, 2000; Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998).

Where individuals fall on this continuum has been shown to have profound effects on their thoughts and behavior (e.g., Dweck, 2000; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Mathur, Jain, Hsieh, Lindsey, & Maheswaran, 2013). Because the effects of implicit theories of ability are most prominent in the face of failure and challenges, we examine whether individuals' implicit theory of ability explains their thoughts and behavior after they receive negative feedback.

2.1. Implicit theory of ability and perceptions of negative feedback

Research suggests that people's implicit theory about ability—whether measured as an enduring disposition or induced as a temporary state—influence how they attend to and think about negative feedback. Entity theorists are less likely to seek out negative feedback information (Trope et al., 2003), react more emotionally to negative feedback (Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good, & Dweck, 2006), and are more likely to attribute their performance deficit to a lack of innate ability (see Dweck et al., 1995 for a review; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999). In contrast, incremental theorists are more likely to seek negative feedback, react less emotionally to negative feedback, and are more likely to attribute their performance deficit to a lack of effort (e.g., Hong et al., 1999; Mangels et al., 2006; Trope et al., 2003).

Although goal orientation (GO) was originally proposed as being influential and intermediary in relation to implicit theories of ability (e.g., Dweck, 1996; Dweck & Leggett, 1988), meta-analytic evidence suggests that implicit theories are weakly correlated with goal orientations (Burnette, O'Boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013; Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien, 2007), “providing little evidence for Dweck's (1986) view that implicit theories are

the primary underlying antecedent of GO” (p. 140). Further, other searches for explanatory mechanisms have been similarly disappointing: Cianci, Schaubroeck, and McGill (2010: Experiment 2), for example, failed to find support for their hypothesized mediators: effort attributions, energy, or tension.

What explains how entity and incremental theorists differentially respond to negative feedback? Based on research and theory on feedback (e.g., Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), we put forth two mechanisms that underlie feedback's differential effects for entity theorists and incremental theorists: (1) how much negative feedback has informational value for goal pursuit, and (2) how threatening negative feedback is to the self. Because incremental theorists believe that ability can change through effort, negative feedback may be of higher informational value to incremental theorists. For example, negative feedback communicates information about where they should direct their efforts (e.g., Burnette, O'Boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013). In addition to having value, negative feedback is also unlikely to be considered threatening for incremental theorists. Because ability can be changed through effort (e.g., Hong et al., 1999), negative feedback is not ego-threatening. In contrast, because entity theorists believe that ability is fixed, entity theorists may see less value in negative feedback—at best, it tells entity theorists where they should *not* bother directing effort and does not further goal fulfillment. Although negative feedback may be of less value, negative feedback is likely to be more threatening for entity theorists. For entity theorists, negative feedback specifies an area in which they have low ability (Dweck et al., 1995; Hong et al., 1999)—and, because they cannot change this fact, the feedback has implications for the self. Negative feedback identifies where an entity theorist is incompetent. The idea that negative feedback more threatening to entity theorists may explain why they tend to avoid challenging situations that may result in negative feedback (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Hypothesis 1. Incremental theorists perceive negative feedback as more valuable than do entity theorists.

Hypothesis 2. Incremental theorists perceive negative feedback as less threatening than do entity theorists.

Negative feedback can vary in terms of the standard to which individuals are compared. Relative feedback, also called normative feedback (e.g., Moore & Klein, 2008), evaluative feedback (Taylor, Fisher, & Ilgen, 1984), or social comparison feedback (Harackiewicz & Larson, 1986), compares an individual's performance to the performance of others. In contrast, absolute feedback, also called non-normative (e.g., Moore & Klein, 2008) or criterion-referenced feedback (e.g., Kim, Lee, Chung, & Bong, 2010), compares an individual's performance to an absolute standard. Although theory suggests that individuals tend to prefer absolute feedback over relative feedback (Festinger, 1954; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), research offers conflicting findings (e.g., Atwater & Brett, 2006; Moore & Klein, 2008; Schultz, 1999). We contend that individuals' implicit theory of ability may account for these mixed results.

Incremental theorists are likely to prefer feedback that focuses on *how* they should change (Bobko & Colella, 1994). By specifying a standard for change, negative absolute feedback aligns with incremental theorists' beliefs that improvement can be achieved with effort and with their goals to improve (e.g., Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Wang & Biddle, 2003). In contrast, by only communicating who is better and how many others are better, negative relative feedback is of less informational value to incremental theorists—it offers less information about where to direct their efforts

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