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A Need-based Explanation of the Effect of Feedback on Motivation

Alev Özer

Bogazici University, Turkey, alev.ozer@boun.edu.tr

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explain the mechanism of the relationship between feedback and motivation. While there is a large literature on explaining the effect of feedback on motivation, this paper makes a contribution by adding emotions and need based categorization of employees to that causal relationship. As a further contribution, this paper adds the affiliation-related emotions to the fundamental achievement-related emotions within the motivation literature and argues that employees with high needs for affiliation would perceive the feedback as appealing to their affiliation-related emotions.

Keywords: *feedback, motivation*

1. Introduction

Feedback is considered as a very important concept for the organizational life within the literature. Employees need to know what their superiors or subordinates think about their performance both in order to evaluate their own performance and to be able to develop themselves.

“Feedback enables a person to ascertain how consistent his or her actual work results and methods are with the established standard. Based on this feedback information, the individual can then adjust or maintain his or her performance as necessary to better attain his or her work goals.” (Krasman, 2011). This evaluation contributes to employee motivation and this relationship between feedback and motivation has been largely discussed in the organizational literature. “Feedback, which is information regarding individuals’ current levels of performance, has been shown to influence motivation, job satisfaction and performance (DeNisi & Kluger, 2000; Gregory, Levy & Jeffers, 2008).” (Jarzebowski et al., 2012). The aim of this paper is to investigate this relationship with reference to emotions and with differentiating effects on employees depending on needs for achievement and needs for affiliation. In fact, Belschak and Den Hartog (2009) also argue that feedback leads to emotional responses. These emotions, in turn, will influence work behaviors and attitudes. This explains the major concern of this paper, the process of the relationship between feedback and motivation. “According to Ilgen et. al, it is of key importance to gain a better understanding of the intermediate psychological process that is taking place between an individual’s reception of a feedback message and his/ her subsequent response to the feedback” (Anseel and Lievens, 2009). The main argument is that being given a feedback appeals to different emotions for employees with higher need for achievement and higher need for affiliation and this differentiation derives from the content and style (tone) of the

feedback. Accordingly, it is argued that feedback content can appeal to both achievement related emotions and affiliation related emotions, while feedback style can only appeal to affiliation related emotions.

Although the organizational research has tended to ignore the role of emotions in motivation theories, there is a growing literature on the relation between motivation and emotions. The literature on emotions has a great potential in filling the gaps observed in explanations of motivation theories. Baumeister and Leary (p.498) stated that a motivation that fails to guide emotion and cognition can not be regarded as a significant one. One of the hypotheses in this paper is based on the assumption that needs have a *differentiating effect* on the relation between emotions and motivation. Accordingly, this differentiation can be made mainly between employees with higher need for achievement and employees with higher need for affiliation. “Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggest that differences in self-construals have several consequences for understanding one’s motivation” (Brutus and Greguras, 2008). Accordingly, the main premise is that a feedback can appeal to both achievement-related emotions and affiliation-related emotions, depending on the needs of the ones given feedback. When a feedback is given, an employee with a higher need for achievement would experience task-related emotions as pride and happiness, whereas an employee with a higher need for affiliation would more likely experience relationship-related emotions as acceptance and love. These effects, according to this paper, result from the content and style of the given feedback.

The person giving feedback and receiving the feedback are important factors in the explanation of feedback-motivation relationship. As also stated by Pareek (1977), feedback may be more important for some people and less important for others and this in fact supports the differentiation maintained in this paper between the employees with higher need for achievement and higher need for affiliation. In addition, Pareek (1977) argues that the person giving feedback and his communication style are also important for the effect of the feedback provided. This implies the style part of the feedback effect to be explained below. In addition, as stated by Ritchie and O’Malley, “we view performance appraisal sessions as not just an information exchange between supervisor and subordinate, but also as an emotional transaction – with both the emotions exuded by the supervisor and the content of the feedback message bearing implications for the feedback recipient’s response to the feedback (Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002).” This explains that feedback effect can be observed both in the type of the information and the attitude in which the feedback is given. For this reason, the following part will focus on this differentiation.

2. Feedback – Achievement related emotions

It is well accepted in the literature that feedback is associated with self evaluations of employees with regard to their success at job. When evaluating positive feedback, it is assumed that feedback is considered to indicate success with regard to the task itself, contributing further to motivation. This paper hypothesizes that feedback can appeal to achievement-related emotions of employees. What is meant with achievement-related emotions is basically the feelings of success and self-efficacy and the resulting pride and happiness experienced by the employees when receiving positive feedback; and similarly negative feelings when receiving negative feedback. Most motivation theories on feedback so far have focused on the task-orientation of the positive feedback, as also stated by Deci and Cascio (p.3) that positive value which the person

experiences from the feedback can be due to the confirmation of his competence or self-determination. Similarly, Elliott and Thrash (p.144) argued that “achievement goal” may be straightforwardly defined as a cognitive representation of a competence-based potential that an individual seeks to achieve, whereas there is not much reference to emotions with regard to the feedback. According to Vallerand and Reid (p.240) “informational events are those that allow the individual to feel competent and self-determining. Such events promote intrinsic motivation.”. In fact, the major motivation theory, goal setting theory, was also largely driven by task-related concerns. According to Locke and Latham (p.265), “The key moderators of goal setting are feedback, which people need in order to track their progress; commitment to the goal, which is enhanced by self-efficacy and viewing the goal as important; task complexity, to the extent that task knowledge is harder to acquire on complex tasks; and situational constraints.” As can be seen, there is an established tendency within the literature to focus on the achievement-related motivation factors by overlooking the reasons as competence and self-determination contributing to motivation. It naturally follows that for achievement-oriented people, feedback is directly associated with task-related emotions, as need or achievement is described by McClelland (1985) as as striving to perform well against a standard of excellence. (Fodor and Carver, 2000). Accordingly, employees with higher need for achievement are more task-focused and thus feedback appeals to their achievement-related emotions, as these people seek out performance feedback, as also stated by McClelland (1987 in Schmidt and Frieze, 1997). This explains the relation between feedback and achievement-related emotions for employees with higher need for achievement. The relevance to motivation is explained by Zhou (1998) “Previous research has shown that achievement orientation moderates the effect of feedback on intrinsic motivation. Individuals with a high achievement orientation tend to value competence (Harackiewicz & Manderlink, 1984) and prefer situations that provide opportunities to assess their competence (Atkinson, 1974; Kuhl & Blankenship, 1979; McClelland, 1961; Murray, 1938; Spence & Helmreich, 1983; Trope, 1975).

3. Feedback - Affiliation related emotions

The contributing dimension of the main argument is the impact of feedback on relationship related emotions for employees with higher need for affiliation. What is meant here with affiliation-related emotions is emotions experienced by individuals with regard to their relationships with others. Within the organizational context and with respect to the feedback, the focus of this argument is the relationship of an employee with his supervisor.

It is hypothesized that feedback can appeal to the affiliation-related emotions of employees, in addition to achievement-related emotions. Examples for affiliation-related emotions can be given as acceptance and love. “Barbalet (1998) argues that in social relationships, where a person receives recognition and acceptance, the feeling of confidence has a particular influence” Vaerlander (2008). In fact, the affiliation-related emotions can be considered as a consequence of feedback, as “feedback includes a personal dimension particularly oriented to employees. It can be said that performance feedback has a natural power of influence as a personal information. Therefore, compared to other forms of information, performance feedback create greater sensitivity because of including personal data (Morrison and Cummings, 1992: 252)” (Kaymaz, 2011).

According to Larson (1984), it can be perceived as liked individuals should receive less negative feedback since they will not be perceived as responsible for poor performance as their less liked counterparts. (Adams, 2005) This means, that employees can have the tendency to perceive the feedback as a sign of being liked, depending on the type of the feedback. Accordingly, employees receiving positive feedback may feel that they are accepted and cared by others, in this case by their supervisors. At right this point, the differentiation can be made between people with higher need for affiliation and people with higher need for achievement. Need for affiliation is defined as the tendency to form associations and relationships; to cooperate and converse sociably with others and likely to join groups as a preference for establishing and maintaining positive affective relationship and as a tendency to accept people readily; to make efforts to maintain associations with people. (Wong et. al., p.154). In addition, Shipley and Veroff (p.354) define the need for affiliation as a fear of rejection, and based on this, it can be also defined as a desire for acceptance which can be very easily observed through positive feedback. In contrast, Vaerlander (2008) stated that “if a person experiences insufficient power and lacks recognition in a relationship, he or she is inclined to feel fear, anxiety and low self-esteem (Kemper 1978; Scheff 1997; Barbalet 2002), which in turn may affect the students’ motivation and likeliness to learn (Weiss 2000).” For people with higher need for affiliation, receiving a positive feedback can easily mean a sign of acceptance and contribute to a feeling of being cared by the supervisor, all of which are related to emotions; affiliation-related emotions in fact. This explains the relevance of need for affiliation to positive feedback through the affiliation-related emotions. The following part will explain the difference between the employees with higher need for affiliation and higher need for achievement with regard to the content and style of the feedback.

4. Content of Feedback

There is a tendency to focus on the content of the feedback when evaluating the effects. "Feedback has mostly been considered from an information transmission perspective." (Vaerlander, 2008) Content of feedback refers to the information carried out within the feedback to the receiver. The content mainly serves for informing the receiver about how he performs and how he might better perform, if necessary. This feedback content can be positive or negative, in that it may inform the receiver about his failure or his success. According to the argument provided in this paper, in both cases, effects can be observed for employees with high achievement needs and high affiliation needs. In fact, a diversification can be made with regard to the type of the content between these two kinds of employees. Accordingly, feedback content can be divided under three categories: information on task, procedural information and individual information. For employees with high achievement needs, content as information on task and procedure can serve for the purpose of signaling competence of the receiver. When the supervisor talks about the success of his subordinate with high achievement needs, this subordinate regards this as an appreciation of his competence and his achievement related emotions as success or pride raise. “Previous research (Sansone, 1986) has shown that achievement-oriented individuals react to competence feedback to a greater extent than less achievement-oriented individuals” (Zhou, 1998).

For employees with higher need for affiliation, on the other hand, feedback content in the form of individual information plays a significant role. Content with individual information serves for these employees as an indicator of being approved and liked by the supervisor. When

the feedback content has implications for the individual aspects of an employee, then it has a high influence on that employee. In addition, the terms used by the supervisor when giving feedback is especially important for affiliation-sensitive employees, as they perceive the feedback as a message of their overall personal evaluation. It makes difference for these employees with higher need for affiliation, when a supervisor uses expressions as “very good” or “satisfactory”. Even being thanked would be very significant for an employee with higher need for affiliation. “A recent study suggests that affect may act as a mediator in the relationship between feedback and employees’ goal regulation (Ilies & Judge, 2005)” (Belschak and Den Hartog, 2009).

5. Style (Tone) of the Feedback

While the feedback content is much more focused in the literature, the style of the feedback can also be influential for certain employees; these are employees with higher need for affiliation. How the supervisor provides the feedback is crucial for these employees, as they are concerned with being accepted and seek for any indicators of this. “Feedback style refers to the manner in which competence feedback is delivered (i.e., informational or controlling; Pittman, Davey, Alafat, Wetherill, & Kramer, 1980; Ryan, 1982)” (Zhou, 1998). It addresses the point of how the message is communicated to the subordinate. Applying it to the students’ learning behavior, Vaerlander (2008) states that students’ motivational beliefs are highly related to how tutors provide feedback. According to Steelman and Rutkowski (2004), a constructive feedback giving manner by the supervisor can be related to various positive outcomes such as satisfaction, perception of fairness and motivation.

It is hypothesized in this paper, that feedback style is important for employees with higher need for affiliation, but not for those with higher need for achievement. The reason is that employees with higher need for affiliation are highly sensitive to the communication process. As stated by Vaerlander (2008), “it is essential to discuss the manner in which feedback is forwarded: use of language, politeness, constructiveness, focus on the product and not the individual (Boud 1995).” Employees with higher need for affiliation tend to value interactional justice more than others and feedback giving attitude or feedback tone is highly related to this dimension of justice. Anseel and Lievens (2009) also states that in Gilliland’s original model (1993), ‘the provision of timely and informative feedback’ to applicants is cited as an important factor in fairness perceptions.”

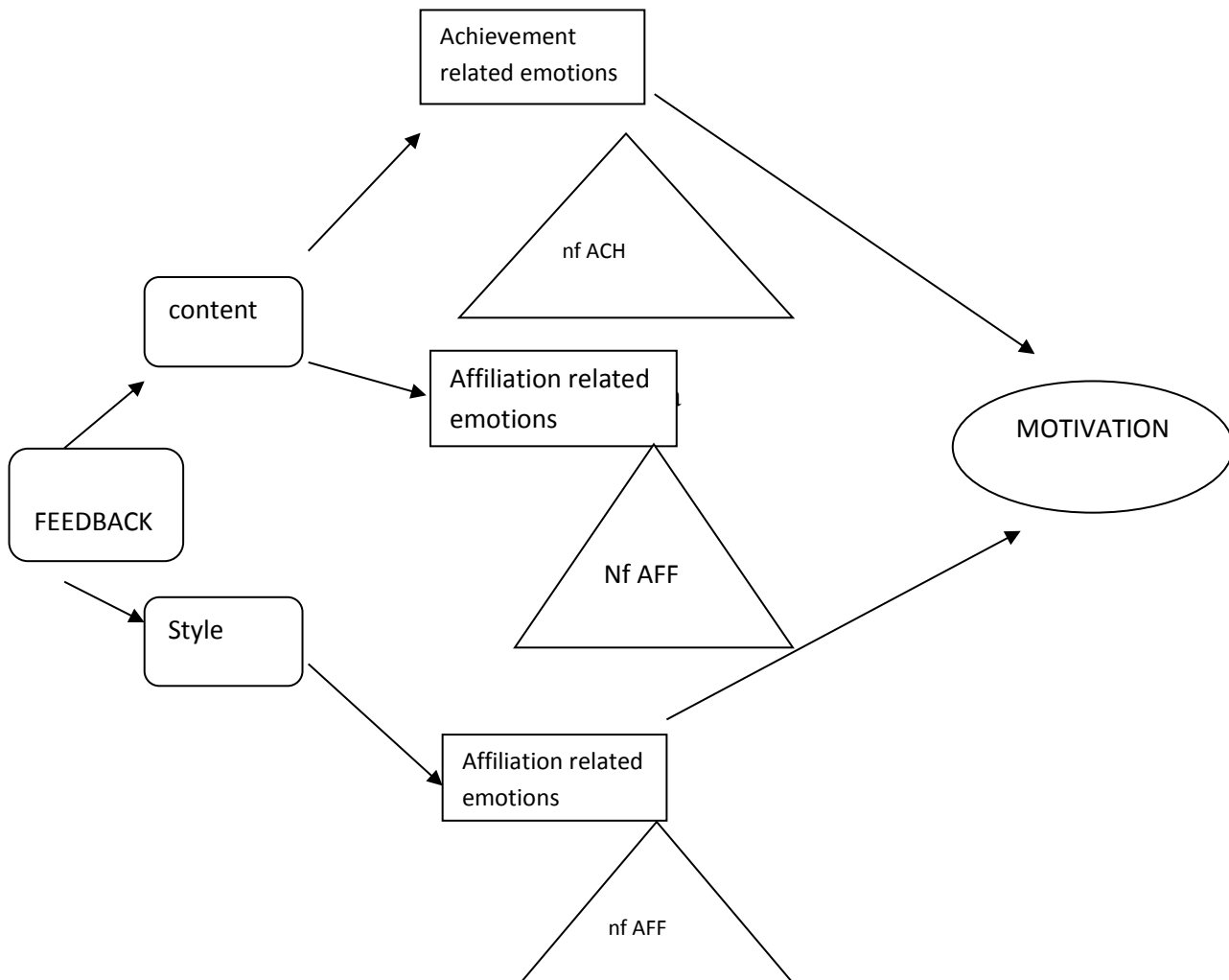
Having mentioned about the features of the feedback, it is important to focus on the relation between feedback and emotions. It is provided on the model in this paper, that feedback has an effect on the motivation by evoking certain emotions. In fact, there is a large support within the literature with regard to the relation between feedback and emotions. According to Vaerlander (2008), “Scheff (1997) explores the emotional side of communication and recognition, and claims that every interaction consists of not only a communication of content, but also of a communication of respect and esteem or disrespect for the other”. This means, that as a type of communication, feedback giving also entails more than content; that is the feedback style in this case. Furthermore, the broader literature on emotions suggests that providing feedback will generally lead to positive emotions, such as pride and happiness or disappointment or guilt (e.g. Lazarus, 1991). Emotions. A study conducted by Vaerlander (2008) also suggests, that, when applying to students and their learning motivation, it was revealed that “Students’ emotions greatly influence the way in which they are able to receive and process feedback, and

sometimes the value of such feedback may be ‘eclipsed by learners reactions’ to it (Race 1995, 67).” It was also argued, that according to previous research, supervisors’ behavior can lead to emotional reactions by subordinates (Liden & Mitchell, 1985). Emotions. While the relation between feedback and emotions is recognized in the literature, there is not much reference to specific types of emotions, which this paper focuses on: achievement related emotions and affiliation related emotions.

6. Emotions and Motivation

The main hypothesis maintains that both task related emotions and relationship related emotions lead to increases in the motivation levels of the employees, as can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1.



There is large support in the literature with regard to the relation between emotions and motivation, as stated previously. “Feelings are responsible for causing shifts in motivational focus and influence work behaviors” (Belschak and Den Hartog, 2009). The premise behind that, taken from the emotions literature, is that emotion causes behavior. (Baumeister, et. al. 2007). For example Norris-Watts and Levy (2004) found that employees in more favorable feedback conditions report higher affective commitment (Belschak and Den Hartog, 2009). Positive feedback can be taken into consideration as a good example. Accordingly, positive feedback contributes to motivation; for employees with higher need for achievement through raising achievement-related emotions, and for employees with high need for affiliation by raising affiliation-related emotions. Motivation used in this argument can be defined as “the aroused state of the person that exists when a motive has been engaged by the appropriate expectancy, i.e., an expectancy that performance of some act is instrumental to attainment of the goal of that motive” (Atkinson and Reitman, p.361). Accordingly, the resulting motivation will be taken as the self-evaluation of the employee with regard to his a priori expectations. Due to the hypothesis stated above, the expectancy of an employee can be two-folded based on the needs: fulfilling the needs of achievement and fulfilling the needs of affiliation, depending on the person. For example, with regard to the employees with higher need for achievement, McClelland (1985) argued that positive or negative feedback concerning a prior performance results in improved task performance for people with high achievement motivation. (Fodor and Carver, 2000). In fact, this differentiation derives from the similar differentiation of individual needs. Deci and Cascio (p.2) have a supportive argument with this regard, claiming that different reinforcements will be perceived and evaluated differently by every person and thus different reinforcements will have different effects on their motivations. This dimension of motivation was similarly held by Judge et. al. (p.530), arguing that dispositional source of job satisfaction was validated when traits are organized according to the 5-factor model consisting of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness. In a similar vein, a study by Erez and Judge (2001) revealed that individual core traits are related to motivation and performance. In fact, the dimensions of need for achievement and need for affiliation can be viewed as dispositional, since a relevant premise of the main hypothesis can be read as people can be differentiated between the ones with higher need for achievement and the ones with higher need for affiliation. In this case, these two dispositional dimensions operate through emotions: task related and relationship related. According to Orehek et. al. (2011), “recent evidence suggests that positive affect increases commitment to goals.”

7. Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to explain the mechanism of the relationship between feedback and motivation. While there is a large literature on explaining the effect of feedback on motivation, this paper makes a contribution by adding emotions and need based categorization of employees to that causal relationship. As a further contribution, this paper adds the affiliation-related emotions to the fundamental achievement-related emotions within the motivation literature and argues that employees with high needs for affiliation would perceive the feedback as appealing to their affiliation-related emotions. To conclude, it is argued that feedback affects employees with different needs by appealing to different emotions and both cases lead to motivation. The striking point is that while employees with higher need for affiliation are affected by both the content and style of the feedback, employees with higher need for achievement are

expected to be influenced only by the content, but not the style of the feedback. This further suggests the more sensitiveness of employees with higher need for affiliation to the feedback.

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