

Reactions to Different Levels of Personalization of Feedback: Moderating Effect of Individualism

Feruzan Syrus Irani
Auburn University
iranifs@auburn.edu

Abstract

The performance appraisal system ranks among the most important human resource functions, yet relatively little attention has been focused on the way performance feedback is processed by people with different cultural orientations. This study explains how and to what extent the level of individual orientation will moderate the relationship between the level of personalization of the performance feedback and the reaction to the feedback. The study was conducted using 92 students who received personalized/depersonalized written feedback after a required class test and their reactions to this feedback were measured. Moderated hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to analyze the data.

Keywords: Performance feedback, individualistic orientation, reactions to feedback



Introduction

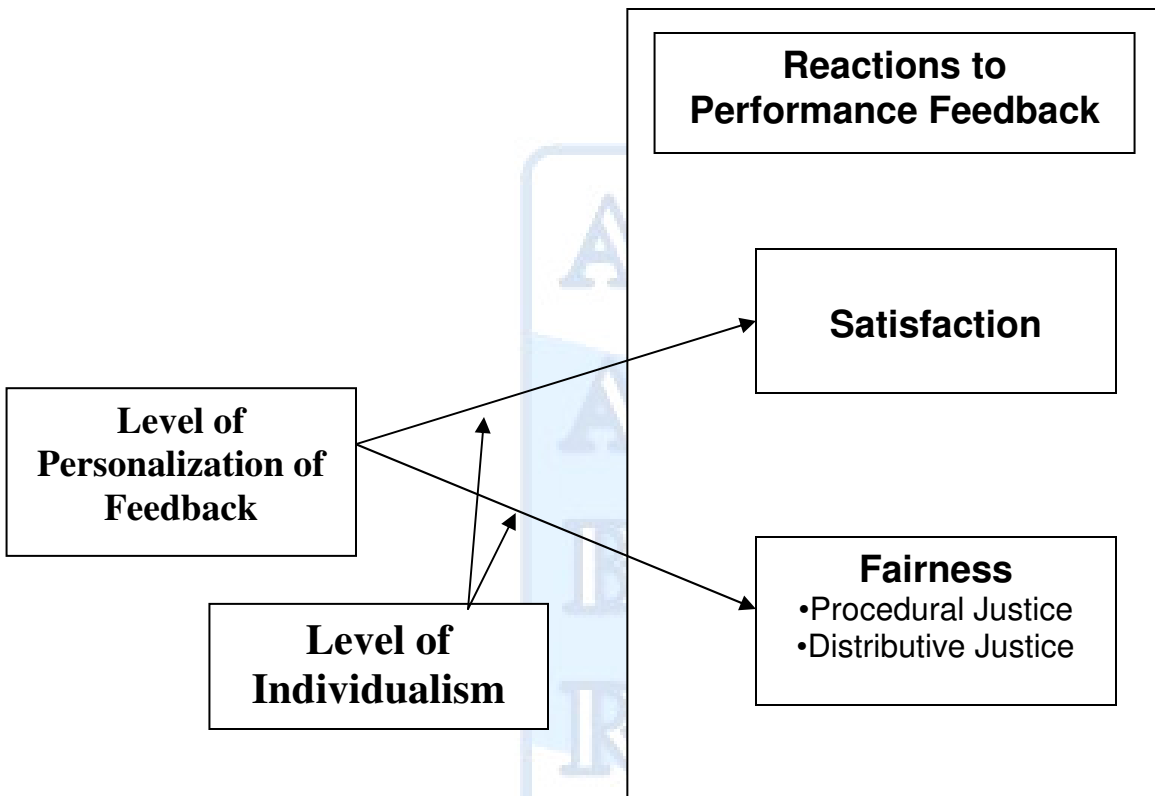
Performance appraisals rank among the most important human resource functions in organizations (Cawley, Keeping, & Levy, 1998; Judge & Ferris, 1993). They are used to arrive at a variety of decisions, ranging from administrative decisions like promotions, pay raises, demotions, terminations, etc., to developmental decisions like training needs, etc. (Cawley et al., 1998; Lam, Yik, & Schaubroeck, 2002). Owing to this importance, performance appraisal garners a lot of examination, making it one of the most researched areas in industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology (Cawley et al., 1998; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995).

Organizations should have an effective system of providing timely appraisal feedback to employees (Lam et al., 2002). Timely and effective appraisal feedback enables employees to identify their present status and their future prospects within the organization (Lam, et al., 2002). This would significantly help with the positive development of job and organizational attitudes (Lam et al., 2002). There has been a ubiquitous amount of research into the *when* and *how* of effective feedback interventions (e.g., Alvero, Bucklin, & Austin, 2001; Cusella, 1987; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Jussim, Coleman, & Nassau, 1989; Kluger and DeNisi, 1996; Locke & Latham, 1990; Nadler, 1979; Saavedra, Earley, & Van Dyne, 1993; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1997), but the *where* and *why* of the success or failure of communicated feedback is still a mystery (Van De Vliert, Shi, Sanders, Wang, & Huang, 2004).

Individuals react differently to different feedback situations. Individual personality and the way the feedback is communicated could have an impact on the way the feedback is processed by the individual (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Lam et al., 2002). Despite the variation in the reaction to communicated feedback between individuals, little consideration has been given to the way recipients of communicated feedback process this information (Van De Vliert et al., 2004). Communicated feedback can be highly personalized (i.e., focused on the individual) or depersonalized/low personalized (i.e., does not focus attention on the individual).

The recipients of this communicated feedback would be on different levels of the individualism-collectivism continuum, i.e. they would react to the feedback differently based on their preference for either personalized (individualized) or depersonalized (collectivistic) feedback (Van De Vliert et al., 2004). This study examines how and to what extent the level of individualistic orientation will moderate the relationship between the level of personalization of the performance feedback and the reactions to the performance feedback. This relationship has been further illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: THE MODERATING EFFECT OF INDIVIDUALISM ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEVEL OF PERSONALIZATION OF FEEDBACK AND REACTIONS TO THE FEEDBACK



Level of Individualism

Individualism-collectivism distinguishes between the self and collectivity (Earley & Gibson, 1998). High individualism places value on self-determination and individual initiative (Gomez, Kirkman, & Shapiro, 2000; Hofstede, 1980). Individualism and collectivism stem from the cultural orientations of people. They are a reflection of individual values and beliefs (Earley, Gibson, & Chen, 1999; Hofstede, 1991) that form the core of most cultures. Individuals high in individualism or high individualists derive their sense of self based on their self evaluations of personal achievements (Earley et al., 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Triandis, 1989). That is, they appraise their actions based on their own work achievements and recognition received (Earley et al., 1999; Triandis 1989; Wagner & Moch, 1986). This is not to say that highly individualistic people cannot be members of highly successful teams. Highly individualistic people may become and continue to be members of teams as long as this helps them to achieve and satisfy goals and needs that cannot be achieved by working alone (Ramamoorthy & Carroll, 1998; Wagner, 1995). Generally, in case of a conflict between individual needs and group needs, the individual needs take precedence (Ramamoorthy & Carroll, 1998).

Collectivism/low individualism, on the other hand, places emphasis on collective identity and interdependence (Gomez et al., 2000; Hofstede, 1980). Collectivists derive their sense of self based on others' actions and reactions (Earley et al., 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Triandis, 1989). That is, they appraise their actions based on the success or failure of their group (Earley et al., 1999; Triandis 1989; Wagner & Moch, 1986). In collectivist/low individualist groups, the group needs take precedence over individual needs (Ramamoorthy & Carroll, 1998; Triandis, 1994). In case of a conflict between these needs, individual needs are expected to be sacrificed in favor of group needs (Ramamoorthy & Carroll, 1998). Research suggests that while collectivism promotes cooperation, individualism promotes competition (Cox, Loebel, & McLeod, 1991; Ramamoorthy & Carroll, 1998; Wagner, 1995).

These arguments can be extended to support the information processing view of the self. People are viewed as information seekers in an information-rich environment (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Earley et al., 1999; Greller & Herold, 1975). People seek information that reinforces their self concept, which, in turn, is influenced by cultural values such as individualism and collectivism (Earley et al., 1999; Erez & Earley, 1993).

Level of Personalization of Feedback

Performance feedback is defined as a transfer of information from the sender, (usually a supervisor), received by the performer, (usually a subordinate), containing a description and evaluation of the performer's actual performance, contrasted with the sender's expectation of the performer's performance (Alvero et al., 2001; Daniels, 1994; Rummier & Brache, 1995; Van De Vliert, 2004). When the appraisal is conducted at the group level and the feedback is also at the group level (e.g. the group's performance is summarized), there is a collective performance perspective (Van De Vliert, 2004). On the other hand, when the appraisal and feedback is conducted at the individual level,

there is an individual performance perspective (Van De Vliert, 2004). This feedback may be interpreted differently by people on different levels of the individualism-collectivism continuum (e.g., Earley & Gibson, 1998; Gelfand, Higgins, Nishii, Raver, Dominguez, Murakami, Yamaguchi, & Toyama, 2002; Hosstede, 2001; Kagitcibasi, 1997; Triandis, 1995; Van De Vliert, 2004). Hence, collectivists/low individualists will look for feedback that summarizes and evaluates the performance of the group and does not focus attention on their individual performance, that is, collectivists will seek depersonalized/low personalized performance feedback (Van De Vliert et al., 2004). On the other hand, high individualists will seek information that summarizes and evaluates their personal performance as opposed to the group performance, that is, high individualists will seek personalized performance feedback (Van De Vliert et al., 2004). Hence, it would seem that cultural congruency is called for between the organization and the culture in which it exists.

The cultural congruency position states that matches between the cultural/personal and organizational orientations (individualism-collectivism) will be more accepted and successful than mismatches (e.g., Adler, 2002; Earley et al., 1999; House, Wright, & Aditya, 1997). In other words, matched collectivist-collective/depersonalized feedback situations and matched individualist-individual/personalized feedback situations will be more accepted and successful than mismatched feedback situations (collectivist-individual/personalized or individualist-collective/depersonalized) (Van de Vliet et al., 2004). The present study proposes to test this type of mismatched feedback situation.

Feedback depersonalization may take place through: (a) the performance criterion or (b) the wording of the message (Van De Vliert et al., 2004). For example, when the group's performance is summarized and used as a comparison tool instead of the individual's performance, the feedback is said to be depersonalized due to the performance criterion used. Also, if impersonal phraseology is used in the performance feedback, such that the individual is not personally attributed with the performance, the feedback is said to be depersonalized due to the wording of the message.

Performance Feedback Reactions and the Moderating Effect of Level of Individualism

It is important to measure employee reactions to performance appraisal as this would prove beneficial to the organization. Research suggests that appraisal reactions are fundamental to the acceptance and use of appraisal systems (e.g., Bernardin & Beatty, 1984; Cardy and Dobbins, 1994; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). Reactions to an appraisal may also help in testing the validity of the appraisal (Lawler, 1967; Keeping & Levy, 2000).

The most commonly studied performance appraisal reactions include satisfaction (Giles & Mossholder, 1990) and fairness (e.g., Keeping & Levy, 2000; Korsgaard & Roberson, 1995). Research suggests that employee satisfaction with performance appraisals has an impact on productivity, motivation, organizational commitment, etc. (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Larson, 1984; Pierce & Porter, 1986; Wexley & Klimoski, 1984). Hence, it is in the organization's best interests to attempt to increase this satisfaction (Cawley et al., 1998).

Traditionally, either the perceived fairness of the performance rating or the perceived fairness of the appraisal in general was used to conceptualize fairness (Keeping & Levy, 2000). Recently, however, the definition of appraisal fairness has expanded (Cawley et al., 1998) to include procedural and distributive justice (e.g., Keeping & Levy, 2000; Korsgaard & Roberson, 1995). Greenberg (1986) defined distributive justice as being concerned with the fairness of the performance ratings relative to work performed. He defined procedural justice as being concerned with the perceptions of the appraisal process.

This study proposes that a mismatched level of personalization and level of individualistic orientation will impact perceived fairness of the performance appraisal. That is, highly personalized feedback given to highly individualistic individuals will be perceived as being fairer than highly personalized feedback given to individuals low in individualism and vice versa.

Hypothesis 1a: The level of personalization of performance feedback will interact with the level of individualistic orientation in predicting the perceived procedural justice of the performance appraisal.

Specifically, individuals who are highly individualistic and who receive highly personalized feedback will perceive the feedback as having more procedural justice than individuals who are low in individualism. Conversely, individuals who are low in individualism and who receive low personalized feedback will perceive the feedback on performance as having more procedural justice than those high in individualism.

Hypothesis 1b: The level of personalization of performance feedback will interact with the level of individualistic orientation in predicting the perceived distributive justice of the performance appraisal.

Specifically, individuals who are highly individualistic and who receive highly personalized feedback will perceive the feedback as having more distributive justice than individuals who are low in individualism. Conversely, individuals who are low in individualism and who receive low personalized feedback will perceive the feedback on performance as having more distributive justice than those high in individualism.

The study, also, proposes that a mismatched level of personalization and level of individualistic orientation will impact satisfaction with the performance appraisal. That is, highly personalized feedback given to highly individualistic individuals will be perceived as being more satisfying than highly personalized feedback given to individuals low in individualism and vice versa.

Hypothesis 2. The level of personalization of performance feedback will interact with the level of individualistic orientation in predicting satisfaction with the performance appraisal.

Specifically, individuals who are highly individualistic and who receive highly personalized feedback will perceive the feedback as being more satisfying than individuals who are low in individualism. Conversely, individuals who are low in individualism and who receive low personalized feedback will perceive the feedback on performance as being more satisfying than those high in individualism.

The other commonly studied reaction to performance appraisals is perceived accuracy (Keeping & Levy, 2000). This measure is most often confused with perceived

fairness (Keeping & Levy, 2000). For this reason, perceived accuracy has not been included in this study.

Method

Participants and Data Collection

The sample for this study consisted of approximately 92 undergraduate students enrolled in a Principles of Management course at a large southeastern university in Fall 2005. Approximately, 37% were female. Data was collected using three quantitative survey instruments. The data collection method and procedure are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Procedure

Participation in this study was made a part of the syllabus with corresponding points added to the final class grade of the participants. At the beginning of the semester, the individualism questionnaire was distributed to all the participants as a web survey which required them to log on using their email addresses and passwords. This web survey was set up with the help of Network and Media Services (NaMS) of the College of Business, Auburn University.

The second phase of the study took place after the participants had started work on their required group projects. There were approximately 18 groups whose members were randomly selected. Two days had been set aside during the semester for project updates. The students were expected to work on their group projects during this time. During these sessions, the groups were required to turn in a one page report outlining their progress so far and the contribution of each group member. The second project update report required the group members to grade the contribution to overall group performance, of each of their peers. The responses were recorded, via a web survey, on a six-point Likert-type scale with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 6 representing "strongly agree". A sample item from this scale is "This person actively participated in group activities".

Participants were also required to give justifications for assigning grades in the form of strengths and areas of improvement for each of their peers. Two different emails were then drafted (see Appendix) to summarize the observation of each participant's level of group participation. One email was highly personalized and the other was depersonalized/low personalized. Half the participants, selected randomly, received the highly personalized email and the remaining participants received the depersonalized email. The emails also contained a code, 1 = highly personalized and 0 = depersonalized/low personalized, to help with later identification of the level of personalization. Participants were asked to remember the code and report it on the reactions survey that they later took.

Immediately after receiving the written feedback, students were again required to log on and take a web survey to measure their reactions to the performance appraisal. NaMS then matched up the two surveys and returned the aggregated data so as to maintain anonymity.

Measures

Level of personalization. Two types of written feedback were developed, with differing levels of personalization of the feedback (see Appendix). Level of personalization was treated as a dichotomous variable with 1 = highly personalized and 0 = depersonalized/low personalized.

Level of individualism. To measure level of individual orientation, a 20 item scale developed by Wagner (1995) was used. Wagner (1995) drew from a multitude of individualism-collectivism scales when constructing his own individualism-collectivism scale. A sample item from the scale is "I prefer to work with others in a group rather than working alone". Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to determine the appropriateness of the items in the scale. Respondents were required to indicate their responses on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1, "strongly disagree" to 7, "strongly agree".

Reactions to performance feedback. To measure the reactions to the performance appraisal two overall factors were considered, viz. Satisfaction and Fairness. In order to measure Satisfaction (with the system and the session), a six-item scale, developed by Giles and Mossholder (1990), was used. Giles and Mossholder (1990) suggested that satisfaction with the review session and satisfaction with the appraisal system should be measured separately. Session variable may be defined as the behaviors exhibited by the reviewer in the review session (Giles & Mossholder, 1990). Since a feedback email was sent out to the students instead of a review session, the items relating to the appraisal session were modified accordingly. A sample item to measure satisfaction with the appraisal email is "I feel quite satisfied with my email concerning my contribution to my group".

Previous research has focused on measuring employee satisfaction with the appraisal session while relatively ignoring the satisfaction with the appraisal system (Mount, 1983; Mount, 1984), despite the fact that satisfaction with the system will immensely impact its success and acceptance (Mohrman & Lawler, 1981). A sample item to measure satisfaction with the appraisal system is "In general, I feel the scoring system used to assess the student's contribution to his/her group was excellent".

The session and system satisfaction measures contain three and two items respectively, with alphas of .89 and .81, respectively (Giles & Mossholder, 1990). Out of the original 3 items from the measure of system satisfaction, one item was left out as it overlapped with items from the fairness scale. Participant responses were indicated on a six-point Likert-type scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 6 representing "strongly agree". The alpha for the overall five-item scale was .91.

Fairness was operationalized as procedural justice and distributive justice. Procedural justice was measured on a four-item scale developed by Dulebohn and Ferris (1999). The responses for the four items were indicated on a four-point Likert-type scale with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 4 representing "strongly agree". It was decided to leave out two items from the six items in the original scale developed

by Dulebohn and Ferris (1999) as they were measured on a different Likert-type scale and came from a source other than the one used to develop the other four items in the original scale. The alpha for this modified scale was .87. Distributive justice was assessed on a four-item scale developed by Korsgaard and Roberson (1995) with an alpha of .93. The responses were recorded on a four-point Likert-type scale with 1 representing “strongly disagree” and 4 representing “strongly agree”. A sample item from this scale is “The assessment of my contribution to my group’s performance fairly represented my performance”.

Results

Reliabilities

Internal consistency reliabilities for all study variables, with the exception of the level of personalization (which was not measured via a scale), were computed using Cronbach’s (1951) alpha. These internal reliabilities are necessary to verify that the measured variables reflect the underlying latent attributes (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). “Internal consistency estimates relate to item homogeneity or the degree to which the items on a test jointly measure the same construct” (Henson, 2001, p. 177). Relative to scales with low reliability, scales with high reliability will have more statistical power (Redden, 2001). Previous literature suggests that an alpha of .70 is the lower acceptable bound for good reliability (Nunnally, 1978; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Streiner, 2003). Using this framework, the coefficient alphas for all study variables (procedural justice: $\alpha = .87$; distributive justice: $\alpha = .94$; satisfaction: $\alpha = .91$; and individualism: $\alpha = .75$), are considered good. Table 1 shows the intercorrelations, reliabilities, and descriptive statistics for all the study variables.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Procedural Justice	3.23	0.55	(.87)				
2. Distributive Justice	3.05	0.67	.71**	(.94)			
3. Satisfaction	4.70	1.05	.74**	.82**	(.91)		
4. Personalization	0.50	0.50	-.03	-.07	-.08	(-)	
5. Individualism	3.39	0.62	-.06	-.09	-.19	.01	(.75)

TABLE 1: RELIABILITIES, MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND CORRELATIONS

Coefficient alphas are reported within the parentheses on the diagonals, where appropriate - ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

Hypotheses Tests

Moderated hierarchical regression analysis was employed to analyze the moderating effect of level of individualism on the relationships between level of personalization of the feedback and reactions to feedback such as Satisfaction,

Procedural Justice and Distributive Justice. Table 2 presents the results of the moderated hierarchical regression tests of hypotheses.

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF MODERATED HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSES

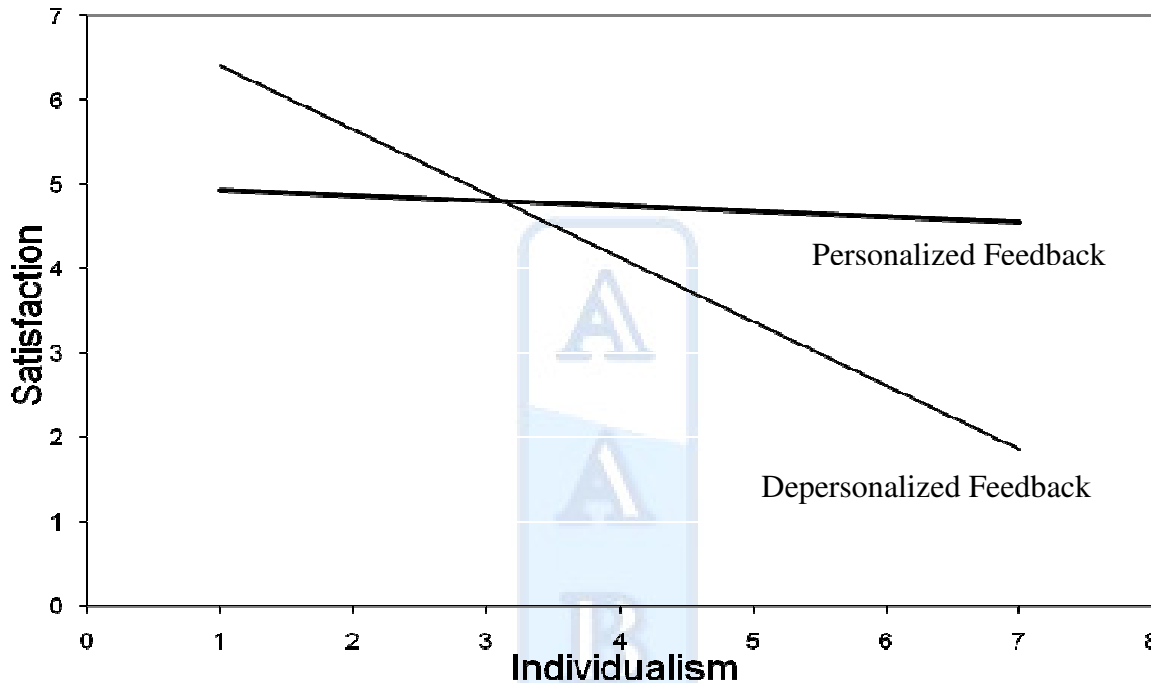
Variables	Procedural Justice			Distributive Justice			Satisfaction		
	β	ΔR^2	p-value	β	ΔR^2	p-value	β	ΔR^2	p-value
<i>Step 1: Main effects</i>									
Level of Personalization (P)	.81	-	.24	.62	-	.46	2.29	-	.07
Level of Individualism (I)	.03	-	.77	-.03	-	.82	-.06	-	.77
<i>Step 2: Interaction effects</i>									
P*I	.19	.02	.21	-.21	.01	.38	-.73	.04	.05

Hypothesis 1(a) proposed that the level of individualistic orientation will have a moderating effect on the level of personalization of feedback – perceived procedural justice relationship. However, as can be seen in step 2 in Table 2, the interaction of level of individualism and level of personalization of feedback did not have a statistically significant effect on the perceived level of procedural justice of the performance appraisal ($\beta = .19, p > .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 (a) was not supported.

Hypothesis 1(b) proposed that the level of individualistic orientation will have a moderating effect on the level of personalization of feedback – perceived distributive justice relationship. Again, the interaction of level of individualism and level of personalization of feedback did not have a statistically significant effect on the perceived level of distributive justice of the performance appraisal (step 2 in Table 2; $\beta = -.21, p > .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 (b) was not supported.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that the level of individualistic orientation will have a moderating effect on the level of personalization of feedback – perceived satisfaction relationship. As per the hypothesis, the interaction of level of individualism and level of personalization of feedback had a statistically significant effect on the perceived level of satisfaction with the performance appraisal (step 2 in Table 2; $\beta = -.73, p < .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported. This relationship is further illustrated in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2: THE INTERACTION OF LEVEL OF INDIVIDUALISM AND THE LEVEL OF PERSONALIZATION OF FEEDBACK AND ITS EFFECT ON SATISFACTION



Discussion

Although, there has been a great deal of research conducted into the *when* and *how* of effective feedback interventions (e.g., Alvero, Bucklin, & Austin, 2001; Cusella, 1987; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Jussim, Coleman, & Nassau, 1989; Kluger and DeNisi, 1996; Locke & Latham, 1990; Nadler, 1979; Saavedra, Earley, & Van Dyne, 1993; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1997), the *where* and *why* of the success or failure of communicated feedback is still a mystery (Van De Vliert, et al., 2004). This study has attempted to extend the existing research by investigating the relationship between the type of written feedback given and the reactions to that feedback (procedural justice, distributive justice, and satisfaction), as moderated by the individualistic orientation of the person.

Results supported the proposed hypothesis that the individualistic orientation of the individual would moderate the relationship between the level of personalization of the feedback and the satisfaction of the individual with the performance appraisal. Hence, a mismatched level of personalization of feedback and level of individualistic orientation will impact satisfaction with the performance appraisal. That is, highly personalized feedback given to highly individualistic individuals will be perceived as being more satisfying than highly personalized feedback given to individuals low in individualism and vice versa. As can be seen in Figure 2, highly individualistic individuals will find depersonalized feedback extremely dissatisfying, and vice versa.

Additionally, in most cases highly personalized feedback will be perceived more positively than highly depersonalized feedback. Hence, unless practitioners are absolutely certain of the level of individualism of their subordinates, they would be better off giving personalized feedback.

Contrary to expectations, the individualistic orientation of the individual did not significantly moderate the relationship between the level of personalization of feedback and the individual's perceived fairness (procedural and distributive justice) of the performance appraisal. One reason for obtaining these contrary results could be the effect of the course instructor. It is possible that the students might have confused their perceptions of fairness of the performance feedback with their perceptions of fairness of the instructor. This would decrease the variance in perceived fairness (procedural and distributive justice) and cause it to have an insignificant relationship with the level of personalization of the feedback, with or without the moderating impact of individualistic orientation. Future studies should look at controlling for instructor effects in order to understand the actual relationship between the level of personalization of feedback and the perceived fairness of that feedback.

Previous studies have not looked at the reasons for the success or failure of communicated performance feedback (Van De Vliert, et al., 2004). The findings of this study may encourage further research into the way recipients of communicated feedback process this information and, ultimately, the *where* and *why* of the success or failure of this communicated feedback.

Implications and Limitations

This study takes a step toward bridging the scientist-practitioner gap. It provides information that may be helpful to practitioners, in that it tries to illustrate the need for congruency between the level of personalization of the feedback message and the level of individualism of the receiver in order to elicit positive reactions to the feedback.

Since college students were used for this research, the generalizability of the findings is called into question. It may not be possible to replicate the results of this project in a real work environment. Future research should look at conducting this project in a real work environment to test the generalizability of the results.

No distinction was made between administrative and developmental purposes for the performance appraisal. The purpose of the performance appraisal may have a bearing on the reactions to the performance feedback. Testing whether the purpose of the performance appraisal has any bearing on the results is an appropriate topic for future research. For some raters, providing personalized feedback may feel unnatural. Perhaps organizations should consider appropriate pairing of raters and ratees. This could, also, be an area for future research. The big five personality factors, viz. neuroticism, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and extraversion, may have an impact on the relationship between performance feedback format and reactions to the performance feedback. This area also bears further exploration.

It is pertinent to note that recent conceptualizations and operationalizations of the level of individualism have considered this construct to be multi-dimensional (e.g. Chen, Brockner, & Katz, 1998; Earley & Gibson, 1998; Morrison, Chen, & Salgado, 2004;

Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Future research should also look at the moderating impact of the five dimensions of the level of individualism (viz., independence, importance of competitive success, importance of working alone, subordinate personal needs to group interests, and beliefs about effects of personal pursuits on group productivity) on the relationship between performance feedback format and reactions to the performance feedback.

This study aims at providing information to practitioners regarding the method to be used in giving performance feedback. The study suggests that practitioners should be concerned about, and strive for, congruency between the ratees' individualistic orientation and the feedback format. This congruency will go a long way toward ratees accepting and appreciating the feedback provided to them. Hence, a successful performance appraisal system should strive for feedback format-individual orientation congruency.



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Appendix

Depersonalized feedback email: (code no = 0)

Dear student,

Your group has ranked your contribution to overall group performance as 3rd out of 6 group members.

If you have further questions, please let me know.

Regards,

Personalized feedback email: (code no = 1)

Dear (name of student),

Feedback from your group members mentioned some of your strengths as _____. Some of the areas that your group members suggested that you might work on improving are _____. Improving these areas will likely help you in your future interactions with groups.

If you have further questions, please let me know.

Regards,
