

# Effects of feedback motives on inquiry and performance

Effects of  
feedback  
motives

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine how two motives for feedback-seeking behavior, the instrumental and image enhancement motives, impact the feedback-seeking process and supervisor ratings of task performance.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Correlational data were collected from supervisor-subordinate dyads and analysed with path analysis.

**Findings** – Results show that perceptions of a supportive supervisory feedback environment are associated with both higher instrumental and image enhancement motives. The instrumental motive fully mediates the relationship between the feedback environment and feedback-seeking behavior. However, the positive effect of feedback-seeking behavior on task performance ratings made by supervisors is only significant when the image enhancement motive is low. Contrary to expectations, no direct or moderating effects were found for the instrumental motive on performance ratings.

**Practical implications** – These results demonstrate that many instances of feedback-seeking behavior are motivated by a desire to enhance one's public image, and that high image enhancers can earn strong performance ratings even with low feedback-seeking behavior. Overall, the findings highlight the critical importance of measuring employees' motives in research on feedback and performance management.

**Originality/value** – This is the first study to explicitly examine how motives mediate and moderate the relationships between feedback environment perceptions, feedback-seeking behavior, and performance in the workplace. The findings suggest that future research on feedback-seeking behavior should measure and model the effects of motives on feedback processes.

**Keywords** Performance management, Employee behaviour, Feedback

**Paper type** Research paper

Over 30 years of research on feedback-seeking behavior have passed since Ashford and Cummings (1983) first described the importance of feedback as an organizational resource. Ashford *et al.*'s (2003) review of feedback research indicated that feedback-seeking behavior can lead to a variety of beneficial outcomes, including enhanced learning and performance, but that the outcomes that arise from feedback seeking are closely tied to the motive that underlies the request for feedback. Consequently, feedback scholars have recently turned their attention to better understanding the reasons why people seek feedback and what diverse outcomes stem from these various motives (e.g. Anseel *et al.*, 2007; Hays and Williams, 2011; Lam *et al.*, 2007; Tuckey *et al.*, 2002).



Previous research has identified that the supervisor feedback environment, defined as employees' perceptions of the extent to which the supervisor promotes feedback-seeking behavior, is a key antecedent of feedback-seeking behavior (Dahling and O'Malley, 2011; Steelman *et al.*, 2004). Supervisors who promote a supportive feedback environment are accessible, provide high-quality and tactful feedback, and are willing to provide both positive and negative feedback to help employees learn and improve their performance (Stelman *et al.*, 2004). Not surprisingly, this prior research has documented that supportive feedback environments encourage feedback-seeking behavior (e.g. Whitaker *et al.*, 2007), and that feedback seeking can facilitate employee performance under certain circumstances (e.g. Ashford *et al.*, 2003; Kim *et al.*, 2009).

However, much of this previous work assumes that supportive feedback environments are beneficial because they promote an instrumental motive for feedback-seeking behavior (i.e. feedback is sought because its informational value can improve performance). In contrast, we suggest that supportive feedback environments may also enable feedback seeking that is motivated by other concerns, such as image enhancement. As Morrison and Bies (1991) pointed out, employees can selectively seek feedback in ways that enhance their social image, such as by only seeking positive feedback or feedback from lenient sources. Drawing from Sedikides and Strube's (1997) self-concept enhancing tactician (SCENT) model, we suggest that feedback seeking has different implications for performance when motivated by image enhancement concerns rather than instrumental concerns. However, no previous research has tested these ideas. We expect that a supportive feedback environment promotes feedback seeking by increasing both instrumental and image enhancement motives, but that this feedback-seeking behavior will result in higher performance ratings when the instrumental motive is high and the image enhancement motive is low. Only under these circumstances will feedback be associated with higher levels of task performance because the feedback sought is primarily diagnostic in nature.

Our study accordingly seeks to make several contributions to the literature on feedback-seeking behavior. First, we provide the first explicit test of how the feedback environment shapes feedback seeking through motives. Motives play an important theoretical role in most research on feedback-seeking behavior (Ashford *et al.*, 2003), yet these constructs are infrequently included in empirical studies, which is an important shortcoming to address in ongoing feedback research (Anseel *et al.*, 2007). Second, we explore the possibility that supportive feedback environments may encourage an image enhancement motive. To date, research on the feedback environment has assumed that feedback environments prompt only instrumental feedback seeking (Dahling and O'Malley, 2011), whereas we suggest that a supportive feedback environment can also encourage feedback-seeking behavior as a means to promote a favorable public image (Morrison and Bies, 1991). Lastly, we elaborate on the conditions under which feedback-seeking behavior is associated with improved performance. Meta-analytic evidence shows that the relationship between feedback-seeking behavior, received feedback, and performance is highly complex and dependent on many moderators (Anseel *et al.*, 2013; Kluger and DeNisi, 1996), and our results demonstrate how feedback-seeking motives qualify this relationship.

### **Feedback environments, feedback-seeking behavior, and performance**

Supportive supervisor feedback environments are characterized by several dimensions (Stelman *et al.*, 2004). Specifically, a supportive supervisory feedback environment occurs when an employee believes that the supervisor is credible, gives high-quality

feedback, delivers feedback clearly and empathetically, delivers both positive and negative feedback when necessary, is accessible, and actively promotes feedback-seeking behavior. As Dahling and O'Malley (2011) recently summarized, supportive feedback environment perceptions are associated with a variety of desirable outcomes for employees and organizations, such as higher affective commitment and morale, lower perceptions of politics, improved feedback orientation, and greater perceived control over information and decisions at work. Moreover, feedback environment perceptions have been found to be strongly predictive of active feedback-seeking behavior (i.e. inquiry; Ashford and Cummings, 1983) in several studies (e.g. Dahling *et al.*, 2012; Linderbaum and Levy, 2010; Steelman *et al.*, 2004; Whitaker *et al.*, 2007; Whitaker and Levy, 2012). We focus on inquiry as well in our study given that direct inquiry is more likely to contribute to performance than passive environmental monitoring because it yields the specific information that employees want or need (Ashford *et al.*, 2003).

Much research shows that feedback-seeking behavior can improve performance by giving employees task-relevant information that helps them to develop role clarity and attain goals (e.g. Ashford *et al.*, 2003). Feedback from supervisors clarifies the instrumental work behaviors that are associated with high performance and rewards, and it can provide encouragement that results in greater expectancy of success at work (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2009; Steelman and Rutkowski (2004); Waldersee and Luthans, 1994). Consistent with this idea, several studies have shown that feedback-seeking behavior can yield improved performance as rated by supervisors (e.g. Dahling *et al.*, 2012; Renn and Fedor, 2001; Whitaker *et al.*, 2007). These performance gains can be attributed to learning and improved role and goal clarity that help employees to more effectively perform their work tasks (Renn and Fedor, 2001).

In summary, we expect to replicate past findings that subordinates' perceptions of a supportive feedback environment will encourage feedback-seeking behavior (Steeleman *et al.*, 2004), which will in turn predict supervisor performance ratings of the subordinates (Dahling *et al.*, 2012; Whitaker *et al.*, 2007). Drawing on past research that has documented the positive effects of the supervisor feedback environment on feedback inquiry, and the positive effects of inquiry on performance, we pose the following hypotheses:

- H1. Perceptions of the supervisor feedback environment are positively related to feedback inquiry.
- H2. Feedback inquiry are positively related to task performance ratings made by the supervisor.

### **Mediating and moderating effects of feedback motives**

Ashford *et al.*'s (2003) review of the feedback literature summarized the major feedback-seeking motives that have been identified in previous research. Although the terms used to describe these different motives vary somewhat across studies (Anseel *et al.*, 2007), we retain the terminology used by Ashford *et al.* (2003) for clarity. As they noted, the earliest feedback research presumed that people sought feedback primarily because of an instrumental motive (Ashford and Cummings, 1983). This perspective states that people seek feedback because it signals the behaviors that are tied to desirable rewards and builds the confidence and efficacy needed to perform tasks successfully (Morrison and Cummings, 1992). Because organizational settings are ambiguous and have high stakes for failure, many employees seek feedback for instrumental reasons so that they

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can adapt and navigate through uncertain environments (e.g. Ashford and Tsui, 1991; Millward *et al.*, 2010; Renn and Fedor, 2001).

However, researchers have more recently realized that employees often seek feedback for reasons other than performance improvement (Moss *et al.*, 2003). Another salient motive for feedback-seeking behavior is the image motive (Ashford *et al.*, 2003). Active feedback-seeking behavior is a public process; other people can observe the results of a feedback request, and feedback is frequently sought from supervisors and other high-status co-workers (Ashford and Northcraft, 1992; Morrison and Bies, 1991). Consequently, one's public image is a pertinent concern that can motivate feedback choices (Bolino *et al.*, 2008), and employees can use feedback-seeking behavior to enhance a public image to appear more conscientious and to remind others of their accomplishments (Morrison and Bies, 1991; Moss *et al.*, 2003). For example, selectively seeking positive feedback, or seeking feedback from lenient colleagues, may result in praise that enhances one's social standing. As a consequence, when feedback seeking is driven by the image enhancement motive, employees tend not to ask about the tasks with which they genuinely struggle and perform poorly as such prompts would undermine the desired social image of appearing successful. The feedback information received in return from the supervisor accordingly has little diagnostic value for improving performance.

Importantly, instrumental and image enhancement motives for feedback seeking are not mutually exclusive; employees can report high levels of one motive and not the other, but they can also report high or low levels of both motives (Morrison and Cummings, 1992; Tuckey *et al.*, 2002). For example, one employee might be motivated to both improve his performance and be seen as a good performer by his supervisor, whereas another employee may care only about learning how to perform better without devoting much thought to how she is perceived by other people. Consequently, taking into account the effects of multiple motives simultaneously is necessary to fully understand feedback behavior and its consequences.

Research on feedback motives is typically grounded in broader psychological perspectives on self-motives, such as the SCENT model (Sedikides and Strube, 1997). The SCENT model describes a wide set of motivated behaviors that people undertake to regulate their self-evaluation. Two evaluative motives described by the model are particularly germane to the present study. First, the model describes a self-improvement motive, which encourages genuine efforts to improve one's abilities or qualities. Second, the model includes a self-enhancement motive, which encourages behaviors that enhance the positivity of one's self-view, oftentimes by generating favorable impressions with others. As Anseel *et al.* (2007) observed, these motives from the SCENT framework align cleanly with the instrumental and image enhancement motives, respectively, in feedback scholarship.

The core proposition of the SCENT model is that people want to maintain a positive self-concept, and that they can do so through a variety of motives and associated behavioral strategies. Different self-evaluative motives are made salient by the features of the situational context. Following Sedikides and Strube (1997), we draw a contrast in this study between what they call candid and tactical efforts to maintain a positive self-concept (p. 225). Candid efforts include self-enhancement behaviors and other overt methods that result in a positive appearance, whereas tactical efforts include self-improvement behaviors that result in indirect gains through personal growth.

To summarize, both an instrumental motive and an image enhancement motive should encourage feedback seeking. However, only feedback motivated by instrumental

concerns should actually contribute to better performance; feedback motivated by image concerns is sought in the interest of managing one's positive social appearance, not improving oneself or one's performance. Consistent with the SCENT model (Sedikides and Strube, 1997), both of these motives can be activated by situational cues, and both have the shared goal of contributing to a positive self-view. Yet, they encourage different behaviors with different implications for organizational performance.

To this end, we hypothesize that feedback motives mediate the relationship between feedback environment perceptions and feedback inquiry. Supportive feedback environments lower the costs associated with feedback seeking and make high-status supervisors more available to provide feedback (Dahling and O'Malley, 2011; Steelman *et al.*, 2004). Such contexts create opportunities to improve one's positive self-view, which should activate both self-improvement and self-enhancement motives consistent with the SCENT model. Supportive feedback environments provide low-cost, tactful, positive feedback from credible and respected sources, which may be particularly appealing to employees who want to enhance their public image (Morrison and Bies, 1991). Accordingly, we hypothesize that the positive relationship between feedback environment perceptions and inquiry will be mediated by both the instrumental and image enhancement motives for feedback seeking:

*H3a.* The instrumental motive for feedback-seeking behavior mediates the relationship between supervisor feedback environment perceptions and feedback inquiry.

*H3b.* The image enhancement motive for feedback-seeking behavior mediates the relationship between supervisor feedback environment perceptions and feedback inquiry.

The feedback received from inquiry motivated by image enhancement concerns is unlikely to actually improve performance (Waldersee and Luthans, 1994); consistent with the SCENT model, the purpose of this feedback is to enhance one's positive self-view through candid means, not tactical means that yield actual growth. In the feedback literature, research shows that employees with a strong image enhancement motive are primarily concerned with receiving feedback that promotes a favorable public image, and they have little interest in genuine learning, improving performance, or admitting potentially embarrassing mistakes (e.g. Morrison and Bies, 1991; Tuckey *et al.*, 2002). Consequently, the image enhancement motive should weaken the relationship between feedback-seeking behavior and task performance ratings. In contrast, employees with a strong instrumental motive seek genuinely diagnostic feedback that can be used to address role uncertainty or performance discrepancies, resulting in personal improvement. Consistent with the SCENT model, the instrumental motive should therefore strengthen the relationship between feedback-seeking behavior and task performance ratings given that the feedback being sought is intended to help improve performance:

*H4a.* The instrumental motive moderates the relationship between feedback inquiry and task performance ratings. Specifically, the positive relationship between inquiry and task performance is stronger when the instrumental motive is high.

*H4b.* The image enhancement motive moderates the relationship between feedback inquiry and task performance ratings. Specifically, the positive relationship between inquiry and task performance is weaker when the image enhancement motive is high.

## Method

### *Sample and procedure*

Participants were 202 employees recruited from Introduction to Psychology courses at a large Midwestern university in the USA, who received course credit in exchange for their participation. The subordinate participants completed a self-report survey concerning feedback environment perceptions, feedback motives, and feedback inquiry in the context of a larger research project on feedback-seeking motives. The participants subsequently recruited their supervisors to provide task performance ratings, which were returned to us through the mail with self-addressed, stamped envelopes that we provided. Thus, both the supervisor and the subordinates were blind to each others' responses. A total of 108 matched, usable responses were received from supervisors for hypothesis testing (a 53.5 percent response rate, which is comparable to the 52.7 percent benchmark reported by Baruch and Holtom (2008) based on their review of response rates in over 1,600 academic studies). A series of independent-samples *t*-tests indicated that those participants without a matched supervisor response did not significantly differ from the participants with a matched supervisor response with respect to any of the self-report study variables (feedback environment perceptions, feedback inquiry, or either feedback motive).

The final subordinate sample had a mean age of 21.84 (SD=6.16 years). The subordinates worked an average of 20.58 hours per week (SD=10.41 hours) and had a mean tenure of 23.89 months (SD=10.41). The sample was 75.7 percent female and was 84.8 percent Caucasian, 7.4 percent African American, 2.5 percent Asian American, 2 percent Hispanic or Latino/a, and 3 percent of other racial or ethnic groups. A total of 2.5 percent of participants opted not to report their race or ethnicity. Job titles included sales associate, administrative assistant/secretary, pharmacy technician, and customer service representative.

The supervisor sample reported a mean of 26.32 months of experience supervising the focal subordinate (SD=30.70 months), a mean of 6.43 years of management experience in general (SD=6.32 years), and a mean tenure of 9.63 years with their current organizations (SD=8.52 years). The supervisors had a mean age of 41.84 (SD=12.57). The sample was 60.9 percent female and was 82.6 percent Caucasian, 7.0 percent African American, 3.5 percent Asian American, 4.7 percent Hispanic or Latino/a, and 2.3 percent Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

### *Self-report measures*

*Feedback environment perceptions.* We measured subordinates' perceptions of the feedback environment set by the supervisor using a shortened version of the Supervisor Feedback Environment Scale (short S-FES). The short S-FES was developed by Rosen (2006) by re-analyzing data collected by Rosen *et al.* (2006) and following the practices suggested by Stanton *et al.* (2002) for reducing the length of the measure. It was subsequently validated by Dahling *et al.* (2012) in a study of feedback orientation at work. The short S-FES has 21 items, with three items for each of the seven dimensions measured by the full FES (i.e. source credibility, feedback quality, feedback delivery, frequency of favorable feedback, frequency of unfavorable feedback, source availability, and promoting feedback seeking); we used the overall 21-item measure in our analysis ( $\alpha=0.85$ ). A sample item reads, "My supervisor is supportive when giving feedback about my job performance." Responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree."

*Feedback inquiry.* Inquiry was measured using a seven-item measure created by combining together the four-item measure of inquiry developed by Ashford and Black (1996) with the three-item measure of inquiry developed by Williams and Johnson (2000). Dahling *et al.* (2012) used this combined seven-item scale, which exhibited better reliability than the separate shorter scales (in this study,  $\alpha = 0.82$ ). A sample item reads, "Sought feedback on your performance after completing assignments." Responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = "never" to 5 = "very often."

*Instrumental and image enhancement motives.* Measures of the instrumental and image enhancement motives were developed for this study. Although Tuckey *et al.* (2002) created preliminary measures of feedback motives, their instrumental motive measure exhibited low internal consistency. Moreover, their image enhancement measure, which they labeled "assertive impression management," included some impression management concerns that may not be related to feedback-seeking behavior (e.g. "I like people to hear about my good performance at work"). Because the Tuckey *et al.* measures have not been subsequently used in empirical feedback research, we took a deductive approach to item generation and followed the scale development practices recommended by Hinkin (1995) and Spector (1992) to develop new measures.

In brief, we conducted a pilot study to develop the motive measures on a sample of 211 employed students drawn from the same educational institution as the sample used in the present study. Our original item pool contained five items pertaining to the instrumental motive and six items pertaining to the image enhancement motive; responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree." Table I reports the items and shows the results of an exploratory factor analysis performed on the pilot data using principal axis factoring and an oblimin rotation. As shown in the table, a stable, two-factor solution emerged with strong pattern coefficients. Consequently, we retained the full item sets for use in the present study, where  $\alpha = 0.72$  for the instrumental motive and  $\alpha = 0.90$  for the image enhancement motive[1].

### *Supervisor-rated measure*

*Task performance.* Task performance of the subordinate was rated by the supervisor on the seven-item measure ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ) developed by Williams and Anderson (1991). A sample item from this measure reads, "Performs tasks that are expected of him/her." Responses were made on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree."

## **Results**

### *Confirmatory factor analysis*

Given that the subordinate self-report measures concerned a number of feedback-related constructs, we conducted a CFA on the self-reported measures before testing our hypotheses. We created parcels for each of the seven sub-scales of the Feedback Environment Scale due to the length of the scale to yield seven indicators for this construct (Hall *et al.*, 1999). Feedback inquiry, the image enhancement motive, and the instrumental motive were all indicated by their individual items. As expected, the hypothesized, four-factor measurement model exhibited acceptable fit to the data (Kline, 2011;  $\chi^2_{(243)} = 446.64$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; CFI = 0.90; TLI = 0.89; RMSEA = 0.06; SRMR = 0.06).

**Table I.**  
Principal axis  
factoring pattern  
coefficients of  
feedback motive  
items with oblimin  
rotation (pilot study)

Items	Factor		Extracted communalities
	1 (image enhancement)	2 (instrumental)	
1. I can learn more about the performance expectations that others set for me by asking for feedback	-0.03	<i>0.75</i>	0.55
2. My job-related skills can be improved if I ask for feedback	-0.07	<i>0.73</i>	0.52
3. I ask for feedback to help me "learn the ropes" when new performance goals and expectations are set for me	-0.03	<i>0.77</i>	0.58
4. I seek feedback when I am uncertain about my role in the organization	0.11	<i>0.56</i>	0.35
5. When I ask for feedback, I do so because I want information related to my duties in the organization	0.04	<i>0.73</i>	0.55
25. I like to ask for feedback because it gives me a good opportunity to remind others of my accomplishments	<i>0.82</i>	0.01	0.68
26. Asking for feedback is a good way to emphasize my good qualities to others	<i>0.87</i>	-0.04	0.74
27. I ask for feedback at work because I know it will enhance the way that others see me	<i>0.84</i>	-0.02	0.70
28. Requesting feedback can communicate to others that I am a good, responsible worker	<i>0.74</i>	0.11	0.59
29. I can make a good impression on others by asking for feedback on tasks that I know I have performed well on	<i>0.82</i>	0.03	0.69
30. I can appear very competent if I ask for feedback from the right people	<i>0.69</i>	-0.06	0.47
Eigenvalues	4.52	2.70	
% variance explained	41.11	24.57	

**Note:** Primary pattern coefficient for each item is presented in italic face



We compared the fit of this hypothesized model to two alternative measurement models. Alternative model no. 1 consisted of a single-factor solution in which all items loaded on one construct reflecting global feedback propensity. This model exhibited very poor results ( $\chi^2_{(249)} = 1,370.68, p < 0.001$ ; CFI = 0.45; TLI = 0.39; RMSEA = 0.15; SRMR = 0.18) and fit the data significantly worse than the hypothesized model ( $\Delta\chi^2_{(6)} = 924.04, p < 0.001$ ). In alternative model no. 2, we tested a three-factor solution in which both sets of motive items (instrumental and image enhancement) were specified to load on a single factor representing a global motivation to approach feedback. Feedback environment perceptions and feedback inquiry remained separate constructs with their hypothesized indicators. This second alternative model also did not exhibit acceptable results ( $\chi^2_{(246)} = 593.90, p < 0.001$ ; CFI = 0.83; TLI = 0.81; RMSEA = 0.09; SRMR = 0.11) and fit the data significantly worse than the hypothesized model ( $\Delta\chi^2_{(3)} = 147.26, p < 0.001$ ). Thus, given support for the factorial stability of the new motive measures and the distinctiveness of the self-report measures, we proceeded to hypothesis testing.

### *Tests of hypotheses*

Table II reports the correlations and descriptive statistics for the study variables. As shown in this table, demographic variables were generally unrelated to any of the constructs in the model except for a negative relationship between tenure and the instrumental motive. This relationship is consistent with an observed trend in the feedback literature that shows that experienced employees tend to seek less feedback (e.g. Ashford, 1986). Feedback inquiry had positive, bivariate relationships with feedback environment perceptions and both motives consistent with our expectations. The only significant predictor of task performance was feedback inquiry.

We tested our hypotheses using path analysis (Kline, 2011) as shown in Figure 1. The path model shown in the figure exhibited acceptable fit to the data with a non-significant  $\chi^2$ -statistic (Kline, 2011;  $\chi^2_{(8)} = 13.69, ns$ ; CFI = 0.88; RMSEA = 0.08; SRMR = 0.07). *H1*, which posited a positive relationship between feedback environment perceptions and inquiry, was supported with a positive bivariate correlation ( $r = 0.16, p < 0.05$ ), yet this effect became non-significant in the path model ( $\beta = 0.05, ns$ ) when the effects of motives on inquiry were included. However, *H2*, which posited a positive relationship between inquiry and task performance, was supported ( $\beta = 0.23, p < 0.05$ ).

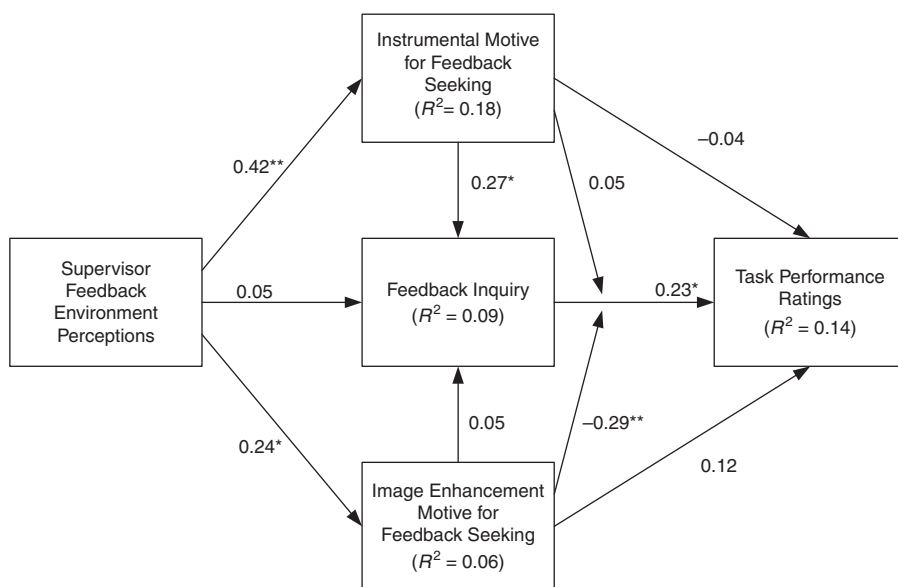
*H3a* and *3b* concerned the mediating roles of the instrumental and image enhancement motives, respectively, in the relationship between feedback environment perceptions and inquiry. We tested these indirect effects in the path model with bootstrapped standard errors ( $N = 5,000$  draws; Shrout and Bolger, 2002) to construct 95 percent confidence intervals around the estimated effect. Results indicated that *H3a* was supported; the instrumental motive mediated the relationship between feedback environment perceptions and inquiry as expected ( $ab = 0.19, 95$  percent confidence interval (CI) = 0.04-0.45). Further, the distal indirect effect from feedback environment perceptions to task performance ratings via the instrumental motive and inquiry was also significant ( $ab = 0.05, 95$  percent CI = 0.01-0.17). However, *H3b* was not supported because the image enhancement motive did not have a significant direct effect on inquiry ( $\beta = 0.05, ns$ ), which precluded a significant indirect effect via this motive.

*H4a* and *4b* concerned the moderating effects of the instrumental and image enhancement motives, respectively, on the relationship between inquiry and task performance ratings. As shown in Figure 1, *H4a* was unsupported ( $\beta = 0.05, ns$ ).

**Table II.**  
Correlations and  
descriptive statistics

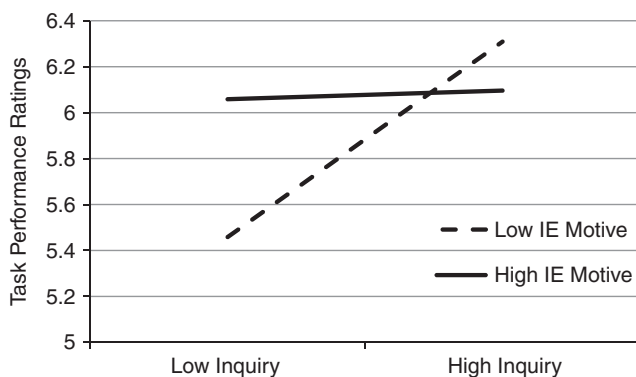
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Employee gender	—	—	—								
2. Employee age (years)	21.84	6.16	0.04	—							
3. Employee tenure	23.89	26.06	0.09	0.52**	—						
4. Employee hours/week	20.58	10.41	-0.12	0.38**	0.30**	—					
5. Supervisor feedback environment	3.82	0.57	0.03	-0.06	-0.10	-0.02	0.85	—			
6. Feedback inquiry	2.48	0.84	0.06	0.03	-0.09	0.01	0.16*	0.82	—		
7. Image enhancement motive	2.89	0.86	0.03	-0.12	-0.09	-0.08	0.08	0.22**	0.90	—	
8. Inst. motive	3.99	0.48	-0.10	-0.04	-0.17*	-0.14	0.37**	0.23**	0.14	0.72	—
9. Task performance rating	5.94	0.99	0.13	-0.08	-0.03	-0.08	0.09	0.27**	0.08	0.07	0.85

**Notes:** Inst, instrumental. Gender is coded such that 1 = male, 2 = female. Tenure is reported in months. Coefficient  $\alpha$ 's for measures are reported on the diagonal. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$



**Figure 1.** Results of path analysis model of hypothesized effects of feedback environment perceptions, feedback motives, and feedback-seeking behavior on task performance

However, *H4b* was supported with a significant interaction ( $\beta = -0.29, p < 0.01$ ). Following procedures described by Aiken and West (1991), we plotted this interaction in Figure 2 and high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) levels of inquiry and the image enhancement motive. Results indicate that feedback inquiry had a strong, positive relationship with task performance ratings for those employees with low image enhancement motives (-1 SD;  $b = 0.44, SE = 0.12, t = 3.71, p < 0.01$ ), whereas inquiry was unrelated to task performance ratings for those employees with high image enhancement concerns (+1 SD;  $b = 0.02, SE = 0.13, t = 0.15, ns$ ). However, as shown in Figure 2, it is noteworthy that employees with high image enhancement concerns had uniformly high performance ratings across inquiry levels, an issue that we explore in the Discussion.



Note: IE, image enhancement

**Figure 2.** Interaction of feedback inquiry and image enhancement motive on task performance ratings

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Given that the instrumental and image enhancement motives may be complementary, we also tested for significant three-way interactions between inquiry, the instrumental motive, and the image enhancement motive on task performance. However, we found no support for significant three-way interactions that would suggest higher order dependencies between the motives.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the mediating and moderating effects of feedback motives on the relationships between feedback environment perceptions, inquiry, and task performance ratings. The mixed support for our hypotheses highlights the importance of taking into account-specific motives when studying these relationships. We observed a significant positive bivariate correlation between the feedback environment and feedback inquiry. However, feedback environment perceptions had a non-significant direct effect on feedback inquiry after controlling for personal motives for feedback seeking. Similar results were reported by Dahling *et al.* (2012), who found that the relationship between feedback environment perceptions and inquiry became non-significant when employees' feedback orientation was taken into account.

A significant indirect effect from feedback environment perceptions to inquiry through the instrumental motive emerged in the analysis. This effect is consistent with the self-improvement pathways posited by Sedikides and Strube's (1997) SCENT model and suggests that feedback environments do activate motives for personal growth and development. We also found that feedback environment perceptions were positively related to the image enhancement motive, consistent with the self-enhancement pathways of the SCENT model. However, the image enhancement motive was unrelated to inquiry in our model.

With respect to the hypothesized moderators, a fuller picture emerged when we incorporated performance ratings. In alignment with much past research, we found that feedback inquiry was positively related to supervisors' task performance ratings (e.g. Renn and Fedor, 2001; Whitaker *et al.*, 2007). Although the instrumental motive did not moderate this relationship, the image enhancement motive interacted with inquiry consistent with our expectations and the predictions of the SCENT model. Specifically, the relationship between inquiry and task performance ratings was only significant for those employees with a low image enhancement motive. Thus, inquiry is not associated with better performance for individuals who report high levels of the image enhancement motive. Overall, we explained approximately 14 percent of the variability in task performance, which is noteworthy given that we focussed only on feedback processes as predictors of performance.

The lack of support that we found for the instrumental motive as a moderator of the feedback process is surprising. One possible explanation for this finding is that employees in our sample exhibited a higher mean and lower variability in the instrumental motive than the image enhancement motive. This low variability may have obscured our ability to detect a significant interaction (McClelland and Judd, 1993). It may be the case that the participants in our study had a uniformly high need for feedback to help with their self-improvement efforts early in their careers; feedback tends to be sought most frequently by inexperienced employees and organizational newcomers (Ashford and Black, 1996). However, future research is needed to explore this possibility with different samples.

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*Directions for future research and practice*

Our findings expand our understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding feedback inquiry and exchange and offer several important implications for future research and practice. Our work is the first study to suggest that the feedback-seeking process delineated by Ashford *et al.* (2003) may not be as straightforward as once assumed. The results show that feedback environments promote both instrumental and image enhancement motives, which calls into question the nature of the feedback information that employees are requesting from supervisors in these contexts. Supportive feedback environments may create opportunities for impression management behaviors (Bolino *et al.*, 2008), a point that has not been considered in previous research. Easy access to tactful, positive, credible feedback from supervisors seems to encourage feedback-seeking behavior from employees who seek to improve their public images, and future research should examine supportive feedback environments as potential antecedents of political behavior and the use of impression management tactics. Although feedback requests that are motivated by this concern can result in feedback that is reaffirming and desirable to hear, one concern is that it may be sought at the expense of diagnostic, task-related feedback.

However, our findings contradict the notion that the image enhancement motive is inherently problematic. Indeed, Figure 2 shows that employees who express a high image enhancement motive received uniformly high performance ratings regardless of their inquiry levels. This result suggests that the image enhancement motive could yield organizational rewards by promoting favorable performance impressions. Consistent with this idea, Yun *et al.* (2007) recognized that impression management concerns can promote organizationally beneficial outcomes (e.g. helping behaviors). Future research incorporating objective performance ratings can establish whether high image enhancers are both “looking good” and “doing good” vs capitalizing on a supportive feedback environment to further their standing. For example, one potential reason that high image enhancement motives result in high performance ratings is that supervisors perceive that high image enhancers care about their jobs, and this in part drives high performance ratings. In other words, image enhancement may suggest to managers that employees are committed and interested in performing well (Yun *et al.*, 2007). Altogether, our findings urge more formal consideration of how low image enhancers “lose out” in the workplace and reinforce that high levels of inquiry are beneficial for high or low image enhancers, as shown in Figure 2 (Ashford and Northcraft, 1992).

From a practical standpoint, we believe there is also considerable value in diagnosing how employees perceive and use organizations’ feedback environments. Our results highlight the need for managers to attend to employee behavior and results in the aftermath of feedback delivery. Discussing how managers perceive employees’ requests for feedback and monitor the outcomes of feedback exchanges are important yet overlooked steps in the performance management process. Of particular importance is the need to examine feedback environments in a multilevel fashion. To date, all research on feedback environments has measured this construct in terms of individual employees’ perceptions (Dahling and O’Malley, 2011). In contrast, the notion of a feedback “environment” implies a unit-level construct with agreement among employees working under the same supervisor. Studying feedback environments in a multilevel fashion would allow organizations to identify workgroups with potential difficulties in feedback provision.

Additionally, our findings underscore the point that many instances of feedback-seeking behavior are not motivated by any genuine desire to improve performance or

master tasks, which may account for the relatively weak meta-analytic relationships observed between feedback-seeking behavior and task performance in recent research (Anseel *et al.*, 2013). We suggest that feedback seeking does have stronger effects that become evident when researchers examine feedback-seeking motives as critical moderators of the relationships between feedback-seeking behaviors and performance criteria.

#### *Limitations and conclusion*

Rather than inferring the existence of specific motives, we explicitly examined two competing motives and the social context in which they operate. However, our findings need to be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, our sample was comprised of working students. We felt that a sample of working students was reasonable because feedback-seeking behavior can occur in any job and among any age group, and there is no particular reason to believe that young workers are unconcerned with learning to perform well, managing their public image, and earning favorable evaluations from their supervisors. Many published studies on feedback seeking have used samples of working undergraduates (e.g. Brutus and Greguras, 2008; Levy *et al.*, 1995; Linderbaum and Levy, 2010; Morrison and Cummings, 1992; VandeWalle *et al.*, 2001; VandeWalle and Cummings, 1997), and their results parallel those found for older workers. In our manuscript, a review of the means and standard deviations reported in Table II shows that the sample does engage in feedback seeking at a relatively high level and that our participants vary in their motives and feedback environment perceptions as anticipated. However, our results should be replicated with a more diverse sample, ideally one that consists of employees working full-time in more advanced jobs. The instrumental motive may be most pertinent in jobs characterized by a higher degree of uncertainty and complexity (Ashford *et al.*, 2003).

Second, we used a cross-sectional design to test our hypotheses, which limits our ability to test the causal effects of the feedback environment on subsequent criteria. Given that our model implies a process wherein a supportive feedback environment encourages inquiry, and inquiry in turn is used to improve performance, a longitudinal design would provide a stronger test of our hypothesized process. We urge feedback researchers to utilize experience sampling methodologies in order to explicitly model the role of time in motive activation and the broader feedback-seeking process.

A third limitation of the study is that we focussed on the impact of only two motives. Feedback researchers have identified a variety of motives that can influence feedback-seeking behavior (e.g. Anseel *et al.*, 2007; Ashford *et al.*, 2003; Tuckey *et al.*, 2002), although empirical research examining the interplay among multiple motives is limited (Hays and Williams, 2011). We also focussed on motives that encourage feedback-seeking behavior; there are other theorized motives that discourage feedback seeking, such as ego concerns (Ilies *et al.*, 2007) and the image defense motive (Tuckey *et al.*, 2002). Including a broader array of motives in future research will help to clarify how these motives simultaneously shape feedback-seeking behavior and influence how feedback information is put into practice at work.

In conclusion, our findings help to shed light on the important roles of motives in determining whether or not feedback-seeking behavior occurs and improves performance. We presented the first empirical evidence that the feedback environment shapes feedback motives, and that feedback motives qualify the effects of feedback

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inquiry on task performance. Our study is therefore an important first step in refocussing attention on the critical role that discrete motives, such as image enhancement, should play in future feedback research.

### Note

1. Additional information concerning the pilot study and development of the measures of feedback-seeking motives is available upon request from the first author.

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