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THE EFFECT OF EVALUATOR REPUTATION ON FEEDBACK ACCEPTANCE

by

Lauren A. Spencer

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

Major: Psychology

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## **Abstract**

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This experiment examined whether acceptance of feedback is affected by evaluator reputation, defined as the feedback recipient's perception of the source as a generally easy versus hard evaluator. It was hypothesized that when feedback valence was inconsistent with the evaluator's reputation concerning feedback, feedback would have a greater effect on the recipient's self-perceptions, and secondarily, that feedback acceptance would depend on self-esteem level. Participants received false feedback on their levels of social awareness after completing a task and being told that the experimenter was either a hard or easy evaluator. Participants then provided post-feedback ratings of self-perceived social awareness. Results did not support the hypotheses, but instead suggested that feedback from an easy evaluator had a greater effect on participant self-perceptions than feedback from a hard evaluator. These findings add to our understanding of self-concept change, and may have implications in the fields of organizational psychology, academics, and sports psychology.

## Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Method .....	8
3. Results.....	13
4. Discussion.....	15
References.....	21
Appendix	
1. Institutional Review Board Approval .....	26
2. Consent Form.....	27
3. Social Awareness Task .....	29
4. Feedback Scripts .....	32
5. Debriefing Form.....	33
6. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale .....	34
7. Self-Perception Measure .....	35
8. Manipulation Check Survey.....	38

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

People use evaluative information that they receive from others to form their own self-perceptions and self-evaluations (Baumeister, 1998). This information is often obtained when one individual evaluates another individual in a certain domain based on performance or some other type of behavior. Evaluation by a college instructor or work supervisor are common examples. In some cases, the recipient of feedback will adjust self-perceptions in accordance with feedback (Binderman, Fretz, Scott, & Abrams, 1972; Harvey & Clapp, 1965), which is referred to as feedback acceptance, and many factors have been found to determine the degree to which feedback acceptance occurs. For example, past research has shown that people are more likely to accept feedback that is positive (Halperin, Snyder, Shenkel, & Houston, 1976; Lundgren, Sampson, and Cahoon, 1998; Snyder & Cowles, 1979), consistent with initial self-perceptions (Shrauger, 1975), from a source perceived as credible (Binderman et al., 1972; Halperin et al., 1976; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1999; Wilson & Sherrell, 1993) or from a source with whom they have a close relationship (Lundgren & Rudawsky, 1998). Additionally, self-esteem moderates the relationship between many of these variables and feedback acceptance (Shrauger & Rosenberg, 1970; Stotland, Thorley, Thomas, Cohen, & Zander, 1957; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1999). The present study examined the primary hypothesis that the reputation of an evaluator regarding feedback affects feedback acceptance. Reputation refers to the general perceptions by others of the evaluator's tendency to give feedback that is either positive or negative. Specifically, it was proposed that feedback that was inconsistent with the reputation of an evaluator would influence the recipient's self-perceptions more than consistent feedback. A secondary hypothesis was that the effects of source reputation on feedback acceptance would depend on self-esteem level.

People seek out knowledge about themselves (Baumeister, 1999). However, people are also driven by internal needs that result in biases in processing that information. A basic understanding of how self-relevant information is processed is fundamental to understanding how self-perceptions change based on feedback as well as why processing of this information is likely to be biased.

Two very similar theories view information processing as occurring through two pathways. The elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Wegener, 1998) and the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989) are referred to as dual-mode processing models. According to both of these theories, there are two routes by which information is processed: one that requires a large amount of effort and carefully examines information (central route or systematic processing), and another that is based on heuristics, or mental shortcuts, and requires less effort (peripheral route or heuristic processing).

The processing pathway used depends on the availability of motivation and ability to process information (Petty, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 1997). Motivation to process information might be low if the topic seems uninteresting or irrelevant, or if the person processing the information feels that his attitude toward the topic is of little importance. The ability to process information may be lacking when people are very distracted or if they do not have enough prerequisite knowledge to process the incoming information. Certain factors, including framing a message in an unexpected way, or including key phrases that reference broad sets of values, tend to increase systematic processing (Petty et al., 1997).

Based on these two requirements for systematic processing, it is reasonable to expect that self-relevant information will almost always be processed systematically. Motivation to process such information should be high, since self-interest is a large determining factor of an issue's importance (Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995; Petty, Cacioppo, &

Haugtvedt, 1992). Additionally, one should be highly able to process self-relevant information, because prerequisite knowledge of the topic should be abundant. Research supports this idea that self-relevance increases systematic processing (Turco, 1996) and has linked the use of self-relevance in processing of personal information to more powerful encoding and better memory of that information (Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1999). Systematic processing is likely to result in biased processing (Petty et al., 1997). It has also been found that possession of knowledge relevant to the attitude can result in biased information processing (Biek, Wood, & Chaiken, 1996). When the topic is oneself, it can surely be said that one possesses a great deal of relevant knowledge. So, from an information processing perspective, people are highly motivated and equipped to process and understand self-relevant information. Therefore, self-relevant evaluative feedback would be expected to be processed systematically and with bias.

Two motives have been identified that can bias the processing of self-relevant information: self-enhancement (Baumeister, 1998) and self-verification (Swann, 1987). Self-enhancement is the need to view oneself positively. People generally seek and accept feedback that allows them to feel good about themselves, resulting in a bias toward positive feedback (Baumeister, 1998). Self-verification is the need for consistency within the self-concept (Swann, 1987). Because of this motive, information that agrees with the current view of the self is more easily accepted than information that conflicts with it. In many instances, positive feedback satisfies the needs for both enhancement and verification. However, there are also times when positive feedback may be inconsistent with one's self-concept.

In people with low self-esteem, there can exist a conflict in motives called cognitive-affective crossfire (Swann et al., 1999). Individuals with low self-esteem have a relatively less positive view of themselves, so that negative self-relevant information may fulfill the need for self-verification, whereas positive self-relevant information fulfills the need for



self-enhancement. So, for people low in self-esteem, these two motives can be at odds. This was exemplified in a study in which people with high and low self-esteem were given either positive or negative feedback on a social sensitivity task and changes in their perceived social sensitivity were measured (Shrauger & Rosenberg, 1970). Self-perceptions of high self-esteem participants in that domain rose if they were given positive feedback but did not change if they received negative feedback. Low self-esteem participants lowered their self-perceptions of social sensitivity when given negative feedback, but did not change them when given positive feedback. This indicates that feedback consistent with self-esteem level is accepted, and inconsistent feedback is rejected.

Research has also shown that high and low self-esteem individuals react differently to social input in other ways that are pertinent to the topic of this investigation. People with low self-esteem have been shown to be more susceptible to persuasion than high self-esteem individuals (Janis, 1954). Compared to those with high self-esteem, people with low self-esteem are more affected by negative feedback and less affected by positive feedback, even when they have comparable starting self-perceptions prior to feedback (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1999). Additionally, people with low self-esteem are more distressed by failure than high self-esteem people (Kernis, Brockner, & Frankel, 1989).

Another way that self-esteem affects reactions to feedback is through expectations. Initial self-perceptions or self-esteem might be the basis for expectations of how one will perform, and for the feedback expected. For example, people who have low self-esteem are more likely to perceive themselves as less capable of earning positive feedback than people with high self-esteem, and therefore might expect negative feedback, and be surprised by positive feedback (Schrauger, 1975). It has also been demonstrated that subjects who are high in self-efficacy for a task (they expect to do well) tend to rate positive feedback as more accurate than negative feedback, and people low in self-

efficacy find positive feedback to be less accurate (Alden, 1986). In another study, subjects who expected positive feedback were given feedback that was even more positive than they expected, and people expecting negative feedback were given feedback that was even more negative than expected (Harvey & Clapp, 1965). Both of these groups that received feedback that was consistent with expectations changed their self-evaluations in the direction of the feedback, while subjects whose self-perceptions and feedback were in opposite directions did not show a change. In the present study, global self-esteem rather than self-esteem specific to social awareness was used to represent existing self-views given the considerable literature on the role global self-esteem plays in feedback acceptance. Like self-esteem level and existing self-perceptions, perceptions of the evaluator as easy or hard might affect feedback acceptance by influencing recipient expectations.

Attribution theory is key to understanding many of the strategies people use to bias information processing to fulfill the needs for self-enhancement and self-verification. When people receive evaluative feedback, they attempt to explain the cause of that outcome (Weiner, 1985). A crucial determinant of reactions to feedback is whether that cause is perceived to be an aspect of the self (e.g., effort, intelligence, ability) or an aspect of the situation (e.g., very critical evaluator, luck). These perceived causes are called attributions. Weiner (1985, 1986) proposed three main factors in describing attributions: locus of causality (internal or external), controllability (controllable or uncontrollable), and stability (stable or unstable). For example, if a person receives negative feedback on a quiz that was taken during a period of sickness, attributions for that bad grade would probably be external (the flu), uncontrollable (can't help getting sick), and unstable (will feel better for future quizzes). People often meet enhancement and verification needs by making self-serving attributions.

Generally, people tend to accept responsibility for good outcomes and deny responsibility for bad ones (Johnston & Nawrocki, 1967; Sicoly & Ross, 1977) to meet self-enhancement needs. However, because the need for verification is often in conflict with the need for enhancement in people with low self-esteem, self-esteem level also influences attributions. Self-esteem has repeatedly been shown to predict emotional (Brown & Dutton, 1995; Dutton & Brown, 1997), cognitive, (Shrauger & Rosenberg, 1970), and behavioral (Silverman, 1964) responses to feedback. People with high self-esteem are especially able to satisfy the need for self-enhancement by interpreting events in ways that protect or increase their self-esteem (Brown, 1993; Shrauger, 1975). One way they do this is by questioning the credibility of the source of negative feedback (Markus, 1977) including both the task or test that is given (Crary 1966; Shrauger, 1975) and the human evaluator (Shrauger & Lund, 1975). In contrast, people who have low self-esteem are inclined to make internal attributions for negative feedback (Fitch, 1970). In addition to consistency with self-esteem level, consistency of feedback with expectations and initial domain-specific self-perceptions can also be achieved through self-serving attributions. Feedback inconsistent with expectations (Alden, 1986; Feather, 1969) or existing self-perceptions (Crary, 1966) tends to be externally attributed to characteristics of the evaluator or task, thereby decreasing its influence on self-perceptions.

Two final theories guide the present hypothesis. Adaptation-level theory (Helson, 1964) posits that judgment of a stimulus is not isolated. Instead, it depends on an adaptation level that is established by the group to which the stimulus belongs. Judgments are made by comparing a stimulus to what is considered normal for that class. According to adaptation-level theory, in an evaluative feedback relationship, the adaptation levels of recipients for their own feedback is determined by knowledge they have about feedback that has been given to others. Therefore, participant reactions to the feedback they receive

might depend on the adaptation level that is established in part by knowledge of an evaluator's reputation.

Similarly, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) states that people compare themselves to others to make self-evaluations, and comparing oneself to someone perceived as better will negatively impact self-evaluations, whereas comparing oneself to another perceived as worse results in more positive self-evaluations. This is known as a contrast effect, meaning that contrasting one's current self-perceptions with perceptions of others results in a movement away from one's initial self-perception in the opposite direction of the perception of others. Contrast effects are strongest when people are unsure of their own self-perceptions and assimilation effects can occur if they are relatively certain in their self-views (Pelham & Wachsmuth, 1995). Together, adaptation-level theory and social comparison theory predict that knowledge of evaluations given to others will affect one's reaction to his own feedback.

The goal of this study was to examine the effect of evaluator reputation on feedback recipient self-perceptions, and the roles played by feedback valence and self-esteem. Participants high or low in self-esteem were given either positive or negative feedback on a task by an evaluator with the reputation of being either easy or hard. Following feedback, self-perceptions in the domain related to the task (social awareness) were assessed. It was hypothesized that evaluator reputation would interact with feedback valence and self-esteem to determine the amount of change that occurred in self-perceptions of social awareness. Feedback that was inconsistent with the evaluator's reputation was expected to affect self-perceptions more than feedback consistent with the evaluator's reputation. Additionally, feedback that was in agreement with self-esteem level was expected to have a greater effect on self-perceptions than feedback that was not.

## Chapter 2

### Method

#### Participants

Participants were 113 undergraduate students at a large metropolitan university. The sample was 76.1% female, and 50.4% African American, 44.2% White, 3.5% Native American/Alaska Native, 2.7% Asian, 0.9% Hispanic, and 4.4% other. Participants ranged from 18 to 50 years of age ( $M = 22$ ,  $SD = 5.1$ ). Participants were recruited via an online participant recruitment system and from classes whose instructors allowed the experimenter to announce the study during class. They received course or extra credit for participating. These participants were selected from a total of 165 individuals because they scored at or above the 66.67 percentile score or at or below the 33.33 percentile score on a prescreen of self-esteem level. Individuals in the middle range of self-esteem were excluded to increase the ability to detect the hypothesized linear effect of self-esteem.

#### Procedure

The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix 1). Prior to the experimental session, participants took the measures of self-esteem and self-perceived social awareness as pretests to qualify for participation in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: easy evaluator/positive feedback, easy evaluator/negative feedback, hard evaluator/positive feedback, or hard evaluator/negative feedback. When participants arrived, they were assigned an envelope designating their condition; however, the researcher and research assistant remained blind to the condition until immediately prior to delivering their respective manipulations. They also remained unaware of which manipulations the other gave. This ensured that participants were not treated systematically differently prior to the manipulations due to experimenter expectancies.

The topic of the experiment presented to participants when they signed up for this study was “Social Awareness in College Students.” Participants reported to the lab individually and were greeted by a research assistant. The research assistant briefly introduced the participant to the experimenter and told the participant that the experimenter would be evaluating them. The research assistant and participant entered a smaller room, where the research assistant closed the door and obtained consent to participate (see Appendix 2). After setting up an online survey system, the research assistant explained that the participant would be completing a social awareness task which would measure awareness of the feelings and emotions of others. Participants were told that their responses would be evaluated by the experimenter, who would tell them how they did and explain the results. Participants were left alone to complete the task, and were instructed to notify the research assistant when they finished.

The social awareness task was designed by the researcher for the purposes of this study to be a believable measure of social awareness to participants (see Appendix 3). Three images of people were presented onscreen, and participants were asked to write a story about what those people were thinking and feeling and what was happening in the situation. Images were in black and white and depicted people in ambiguous situations to allow for many different interpretations. The first image was of a woman and man staring off in different directions, the second was of several men congregating in a parking garage, and the third showed a woman holding an umbrella looking at a train. Participants were given four minutes to write each story. Responses to the social awareness task were not actually read by the experimenter during the procedure because feedback valence was randomly determined; however, subsequent examination of responses confirmed that all participants followed directions on the task.

When the participant reported to the assistant that the task was complete, the research assistant walked with the participant back into the testing room, ostensibly to

send the participant's responses on the social awareness task to the experimenter, and closed the door. While pretending to send the results, the research assistant told the participant that their responses were being sent to the experimenter so the participant could be evaluated. For participants in the negative source condition, the assistant lowered her voice and casually mentioned that the experimenter was a really harsh evaluator, and everyone so far had received a really bad evaluation. In the positive source condition, the assistant said in a lowered voice that the evaluator was a really easy evaluator, and everyone so far had received a really good evaluation. The assistant then told the participant that the experimenter would read and evaluate the participant's responses and would come speak to them in a few minutes.

After approximately 4 min, the experimenter entered the testing room to deliver either positive or negative feedback (see Appendix 4). For participants assigned to the positive feedback condition, the experimenter told them that she saw them as very high in social awareness and rated them a 9.7 out of 10. She explained that they were very attuned to the feelings of others and were consequently better at building and maintaining relationships than many people. In the negative feedback condition, participants were told that they were very low in social awareness and received a 4.3 out of 10. The experimenter told them that they were not very attuned to the feelings of others and were not as good as many people at building and maintaining relationships.

The experimenter then told the participant that the research assistant would set them up for a final survey, after which the study would be complete. The experimenter left the room, and the research assistant started the survey program. This final survey included the self-perception measure and manipulation check survey.

After all measures were complete, participants were debriefed extensively (see Appendix 5). Participants were asked questions to probe for suspicion, and the rationale for the study was explained. The experimenter assured all participants that the social

awareness task was fake, and that feedback was in no way based on their performance on the task or their social awareness, but was randomly assigned. They were told that the comments made by the research assistant about the experimenter were also randomly determined, and that the entire situation was carefully constructed to seem real, because when people know what a researcher is looking for, they tend to behave differently. The experimenter asked the participant not to reveal this information to others who may become participants. The participant was given the opportunity to ask questions, and the experimenter looked for signs that participants, especially those who received negative feedback, were upset. Participants were given the debriefing form, which included information for campus psychological and counseling resources in case they became distressed later. They were also invited to contact the researcher if any future questions arose, or if they would like information on the findings from the study.

## **Measures**

**Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.** This 10-item self-report scale assessed global self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965; see Appendix 6). Sample items included, “At times I think I am no good at all,” and, “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.” Response options were *strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, or *strongly disagree*, with some items reverse-coded. Internal consistency reliability in the United States has been found to be good, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .88 (Schmitt & Allik, 2005).

**Self-Perception Measure.** This self-report measure contained six items used to assess self-perceptions of social awareness and fourteen distractor items. Because no scales existed that measured social awareness as defined in this study, this measure was specifically created to assess self-perceptions in the feedback domain (see Appendix 7). A sample item is, “I can sense how others feel.” Responses were scored on a 10-point scale, with labels of *completely false* (1), *somewhat false* (4), *somewhat true* (7), and *completely*



*true* (10). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .92, indicating excellent internal consistency.

**Manipulation Check Survey.** A manipulation check survey was included to assess the degree to which manipulations of perceived evaluator reputation and feedback valence were successful (see Appendix 8). One item asked participants to rate their evaluator on a 10-point scale ranging from *hard judge* to *easy judge*. Another item asked participants to indicate how positive or negative their feedback was on a similar scale ranging from *extremely negative* to *extremely positive*. Participants were also asked to report the percentage of people they thought scored lower than them.

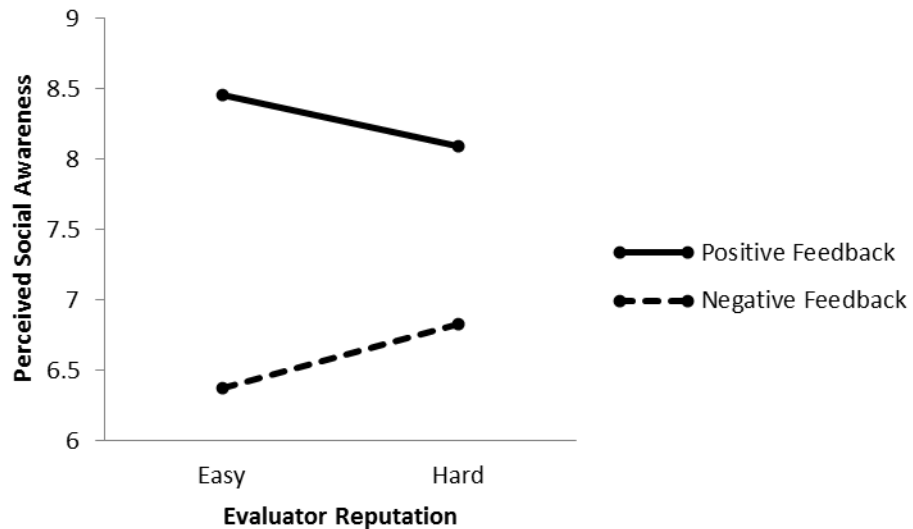
### **Preliminary Analyses of Manipulations**

Analysis indicated that the evaluator reputation manipulation delivered by the research assistant affected participant ratings of the evaluator, with the evaluator in the easy evaluator condition rated higher ( $M = 6.6$ ) than in the hard evaluator condition ( $M = 4.7$ ),  $F(1, 111) = 16.19, p < .001$ . Analysis also indicated that participants rated their feedback more positively in the positive feedback condition ( $M = 9.7$ ) than in the negative feedback condition ( $M = 4.0$ ),  $F(1, 111) = 348.90, p < .001$ . When participants were asked what percentage of people they thought scored lower than them, participants who received positive feedback reported a higher percentage ( $M = 53.8$ ) than the percentage reported by participants in the negative feedback condition ( $M = 23.6$ ),  $F(1, 111) = 62.64, p < .001$ .

## Chapter 3

### Results

Participant self-ratings of social awareness were analyzed using a 2 (evaluator)  $\times$  2 (feedback)  $\times$  2 (self-esteem) analysis of variance with pretest scores on self-rated social awareness as a covariate. Analysis indicated that the effect of the evaluator's reputation depended on whether the feedback was positive or negative, Evaluator  $\times$  Feedback  $F(1, 104) = 3.79, p = .05$ . As Figure 1 illustrates, when the feedback was positive, participants had higher self-ratings with an easy evaluator (adj  $M = 8.5$ ) than with a hard evaluator (adj  $M = 8.1$ ),  $F(1, 104) = 1.41, p = .2$ . On the other hand, when the feedback was negative, participants had lower self-ratings with an easy evaluator (adj  $M = 6.4$ ) than with a hard evaluator (adj  $M = 6.8$ ),  $F(1, 104) = 2.44, p = .1$ .



*Figure 1.* The interaction of evaluator reputation and feedback valence in their effects on perceived social awareness.

The effects of this interaction did not vary reliably based on self-esteem level, Evaluator  $\times$  Feedback  $\times$  Self-Esteem  $F(1, 104) = 1.38, p = .2$ , nor was there a statistically significant main effect of self-esteem level on self-rated social awareness  $F(1, 104) = .001, p > .9$ . Analyses using self-esteem cut-points other than the top and bottom thirds resulted in the same findings. Additionally, pretest scores did not interact reliably with any other factors, suggesting that effects of evaluator reputation on feedback acceptance did not vary depending on domain-specific self-perceptions (all  $ps > .1$ ).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Discussion**

Results did not support the primary hypothesis that feedback that was inconsistent with evaluator reputation would have a greater effect on participant self-perceptions than feedback from a consistent evaluator. It was also hypothesized that the effects of feedback would depend on participant self-esteem levels, and results did not provide support for this hypothesis. Findings do, however, suggest a different relationship between feedback valence and evaluator reputation.

In this study, evaluator reputation and feedback valence interacted in their effects on self-perceptions. Participants who perceived their evaluator as easy tended to change their self-perceptions in the direction of feedback more than the group with a hard evaluator. Three possible explanations for this finding are offered.

First, it may be that people who perceived the evaluator to be easy perceived the evaluator in a generally more positive light (e.g., more likable) and, therefore, cared more about their evaluation. People tend to hold stereotypes that cause them to assume that if a person possesses one trait, they also possess other traits. This tendency has been labeled with such terms as the halo effect or correlational bias (e.g., Berman & Kenny, 1976; Cooper, 1981; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). For instance, if someone is perceived to be friendly, this might result in them also being perceived as intelligent, trustworthy, and loyal. Evaluators who are believed to give positive feedback may also be seen as possessing other positive traits that might result in greater feedback acceptance. Evaluators believed to give negative feedback may be seen as having other undesirable traits which may result in the discounting of their feedback. Studies have found that when the source of feedback (Binderman et al., 1972; Halperin et al., 1976; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1999) or persuasive communication (Andreoli & Worchel, 1978; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Wilson & Sherrell, 1993) is seen as more credible, the feedback or

message has a greater effect on the target. Credibility has most often been defined as including characteristics such as expertise, status, and trustworthiness. Perhaps through halo effects, evaluator reputation affects perceptions of source credibility and/or global perceptions of the evaluator as positive or negative, resulting in feedback from an easy evaluator being given more weight than feedback from a harsh evaluator. Indeed, Keeley, English, Irons, and Henslee (2013) found evidence that the halo effect was at play in teacher evaluations. When certain characteristics of teachers were manipulated, participants shifted their ratings of the teachers overall and on seemingly unrelated characteristics in the same direction. Future research might attempt to replicate and extend results of the current study by measuring credibility along with perceptions of the evaluator on other dimensions to see whether this halo effect explanation is supported.

A second interpretation might be that, when feedback was negative, participants were affected by evaluator reputation in a pattern consistent with the primary hypothesis. They were more affected by negative feedback from an easy (inconsistent) judge than feedback from a hard (consistent) judge. However, because positive feedback is the social norm and there are often social sanctions associated with conveying negative evaluations of others (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1999), participants in the positive feedback condition may have doubted the veracity of their feedback. Therefore, they may have needed to utilize source cues to determine whether they should accept their feedback. In this case, people may have discounted the feedback from the hard source because they suspected that it was insincere.

A third possibility is that this finding happened by chance. It could be that this pattern occurred in the sample used in this experiment, but would not occur in other samples. Replication in future research would clarify whether the effect found in this study is reliable.

Interestingly, and contrary to the original hypothesis, self-esteem level did not statistically significantly interact with evaluator reputation or feedback valence. It was thought that self-esteem level would be important in this relationship because participants with low self-esteem would experience a conflict between the goals of self-enhancement and self-verification. This effect has been demonstrated in past research (Shrauger & Rosenberg, 1970; Stotland et al., 1957; Swann et al., 1999). However, low self-esteem reflects a relatively less positive, but not necessarily negative, self-view. Low scores on self-esteem measures usually reflect responses that are neutral but not necessarily negative, and few people score lower than the conceptual average on self-esteem measures (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). Thus, the low self-esteem group, while possessing relatively less positive self-views than the high self-esteem group, may not have held negative self-views. This would mean that the need for self-verification may not have conflicted with the need for self-enhancement, and participants responded similarly to feedback regardless of self-esteem scores. Additionally, Baumeister et al. (1989) have suggested that self-esteem scales measure a self-presentational orientation, and that self-presentation may account for some behavioral findings from past research based on self-esteem scales. Whereas people who score high on self-esteem scales tend to call attention to themselves and exhibit a self-enhancing presentation style, people with low self-esteem scores tend to avoid drawing attention and have a protective self-presentation style (Baumeister et al., 1989). It is perhaps possible that, had feedback been given in front of a group instead of one-on-one, differences between self-esteem groups may have been observed.

It should be noted that, although this experiment successfully manipulated perceived evaluator reputation, which was the construct of interest, it did not differentiate between more specific constructs that evaluator reputation encompasses. Future studies might be able to separately manipulate participant expectations, perceptions of the evaluator's

standards, or social comparison processes activated by perceptions of evaluator reputation to elucidate how evaluator reputation influences recipient self-perceptions. For example, feedback that is inconsistent with expectations is more likely to be attributed to external versus internal causes (Alden, 1986; Feather, 1969), but it is not known what effect evaluator reputation has over and above effects produced by the simple expectation of a certain type of feedback.

As is common in laboratory experiments, this study's external validity suffered in some ways in exchange for higher internal validity. Careful control allowed extraneous variables to be ruled out, but further research is needed to see if this effect occurs in real-life situations. For instance, in the context of work or school, things like perceptions of the legitimacy of an evaluator's authority or actual implications of feedback (i.e. not graduating, having to redo a task, loss of income) may influence responses to feedback as well. Also, participants in this experiment were all college students, which means that they were used to being evaluated in the context of their courses in the form of grades. This may predispose them to certain types of responses to feedback that might not be seen in populations that are not in college or have never attended college. On average, participants were college-aged, which may also affect the generalizability of results. There is evidence to suggest that the self-concept is more malleable (Demo, 1992) and people are more susceptible to persuasion (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989) at certain points in the lifespan. Additionally, self-perceptions were measured immediately after feedback, and so this study does not address the question of whether the effects of feedback and source reputation on self-perceptions last over time. Because half of the participants received negative feedback in what was intended to be a relatively important self-concept domain, it was necessary to limit the amount of time that they believed the feedback was true. Thus, participants were fully debriefed within 15 min of the feedback manipulation

in this study. However, future research might test the degree to which any effect of evaluator reputation on feedback acceptance persists.

Measures were self-report, and so may have been influenced by perceived experimenter expectancies and social desirability concerns. Distractor questions were added to the self-perception measure to minimize this. Also, this measure of self-perceived social awareness had to be constructed for this study because existing instruments did not measure the construct of interest. Although the measure was piloted and the most reliable items were used, the validity of the measure has not been established. However, in the interest of maintaining construct validity, it was necessary that the measure was worded in such a way that it corresponded to the social awareness task and the feedback participants received.

Although further research is needed to understand why evaluator reputation affected feedback acceptance, results of this study suggest that people are more affected by feedback when they perceive their evaluator to be easy rather than hard. Findings may have implications for the fields of sports psychology, organizational psychology, and academics. Generally, it seems that if a coach, supervisor, or instructor wants feedback to be taken seriously, it would be beneficial to project the image of being a relatively easy evaluator. However, depending on the desired outcome, this could theoretically have a couple of different effects that are at odds with one another. Although feedback from the easy evaluator may be internalized more than feedback from the hard evaluator, perception of the evaluator as easy may detract from desired behaviors. For example, students who perceive their teacher to be easy may actually study less, spend less time on homework, and ultimately learn less than students with a teacher perceived as hard.

To summarize, in this study the evaluator's reputation as hard or easy influenced the degree to which feedback affected the feedback recipient's self-perceptions. Specifically, feedback had a greater effect on participant self-perceptions when it came from an easy



evaluator than when it came from a hard evaluator. Further research is needed to explain why this effect may have occurred, but findings suggest that an evaluator's reputation should be taken into consideration when providing evaluative feedback.

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## Appendix 1

### Institutional Review Board Approval

**From:** Jacqueline Reid Tharpe (jreid) on behalf of Institutional Review Board  
**Sent:** Friday, February 1, 2013 12:06 PM  
**To:** Lauren Andrea Spencer (lspncr2)  
**Cc:** Jeffrey Berman (jberman)  
**Subject:** IRB Approval2518

**Follow Up Flag:** Follow up  
**Flag Status:** Completed

Hello,

The University of Memphis Institutional Review Board, FWA00006815, has reviewed and approved your submission in accordance with all applicable statuses and regulations as well as ethical principles.

**PI NAME:** Lauren Spencer

**CO-PI:**

**PROJECT TITLE:** Effects of Source Positivity on Feedback Acceptance (Prescreen)

**FACULTY ADVISOR NAME (if applicable):** Jeffrey Berman

**IRB ID:** #2518

**APPROVAL DATE:** 1/25/2013

**EXPIRATION DATE:** 1/24/2014

**LEVEL OF REVIEW:** Expedited

*Please Note: Modifications do not extend the expiration of the original approval*

Approval of this project is given with the following obligations:

1. If this IRB approval has an expiration date, an approved renewal must be in effect to continue the project prior to that date. If approval is not obtained, the human consent form(s) and recruiting material(s) are no longer valid and any research activities involving human subjects must stop.
2. When the project is finished or terminated, a completion form must be completed and sent to the board.
3. No change may be made in the approved protocol without prior board approval, whether the approved protocol was reviewed at the Exempt, Expedited or Full Board level.
4. Exempt approval are considered to have no expiration date and no further review is necessary unless the protocol needs modification.

Thank you,

Ronnie Priest, PhD

Institutional Review Board Chair

The University of Memphis.

*Note: Review outcomes will be communicated to the email address on file. This email should be considered an official communication from the UM IRB. Consent Forms are no longer being stamped as well. Please contact the IRB at [IRB@memphis.edu](mailto:IRB@memphis.edu) if a letter on IRB letterhead is required.*

## Appendix 2

### Consent Form

#### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study Social Awareness in College Students**

##### **WHY ARE YOU BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?**

You are being invited to take part in a research study about social awareness. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about 250 people to do so.

##### **WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?**

The person in charge of this study is Lauren Spencer of the University of Memphis Department of Psychology. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Jeffrey Berman. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

##### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

This study will explore the concept of social awareness in college students.

##### **ARE THERE REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study.

##### **WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?**

The research procedures will be conducted in the Psychology Building at The University of Memphis. You will need to come to Room 411 one time during the study. This visit will take less than an hour. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is one hour.

##### **WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?**

You will be asked to complete a task on the computer on which you will be evaluated, and complete some questionnaires.

##### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

If you find some part of the study upsetting or stressful, notify the researcher or research assistant immediately.

##### **WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not get any personal benefit from taking part in this study.

##### **DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?**

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering. As a student, if you decide not to take part in this study, your choice will have no effect on your academic status or grade in the class.

##### **IF YOU DON'T WANT TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY, ARE THERE OTHER CHOICES?**

If you do not want to take part in the study, talk with your professor about other opportunities to earn course or extra credit.

##### **WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?**

There are no costs associated with taking part in the study.



## Appendix 2 (Continued)

### **WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

You will receive 1.5 hours of research credit for taking part in this study. If you withdraw before the study is completed, you will receive credit for the time you remained in the study.

### **WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?**

We will make every effort to keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be personally identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

Your data will be stored using a participant number instead of a name, and only the primary investigator will have access to the file that includes identifying information. All data will be stored on restricted, password-protected servers. We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is.

We will keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court. Also, we may be required to show information which identifies you to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such organizations as the University of Memphis.

### **CAN YOUR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?**

If you decide to take part in the study you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to withdraw you from the study. This may occur if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you, or if the agency funding the study decides to stop the study early for a variety of scientific reasons.

### **WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Lauren Spencer at [lsponcer2@memphis.edu](mailto:lsponcer2@memphis.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-3074. We will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with you.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of [authorized] person obtaining informed consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix 3

### Social Awareness Task

#### Social Awareness Task

You will be presented with three pictures. Begin by looking at the first picture. In the space provided, write a story about the picture using your imagination. Your story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Try to express who the people might be, and what they are thinking, feeling, and wishing. Also, tell what might have led up to the situation in the picture, and how things might end up.

There is no right or wrong answer, but please make sure to write a complete story so that your work can be evaluated.

Do this for each picture. You will have 15 minutes total for this task, which gives you 5 minutes for each of the 3 pictures. Make sure to write for the entire time allotted.

#### **Image 1:**



**Image 2:**



Appendix 3 (Continued)

Image 3:



## Appendix 4

### Feedback Scripts

**Positive Feedback:**

“First of all, I’d like to thank you for taking the social awareness task. I’ve read your responses, and now I’ll just let you know how you did on it. I see you as being very high in social awareness. I gave you a 9.7 out of 10. I think you are very attuned to the feelings of the people around you, like you are naturally good at sensing how other people feel. I would say that this probably gives you an advantage sometimes, because you are better than most people at building and maintaining relationships. Also, I’d bet people tend to immediately see you as considerate and caring. So all of this probably makes business and personal relationships easier for you. Therefore, like I said, I gave you a 9.7 out of 10.”

**Negative Feedback:**

“First of all, I’d like to thank you for taking the social awareness task. I’ve read your responses, and now I’ll just let you know how you did on it. I see you as being very low in social awareness. I gave you a 4.3 out of 10. I think you are not very attuned to the feelings of the people around you, like you are not naturally very good at sensing how other people feel. I would say that this probably puts you at a disadvantage sometimes, because you are not as good as many people at building and maintaining relationships. Also, I’d bet that it takes a while for people to come to see you as considerate and caring. So all of this probably makes business and personal relationships more difficult for you. Therefore, like I said, I gave you a 4.3 out of 10.”

## Appendix 5

### Debriefing Form

#### Social Awareness in College Students Debriefing Form

Thank you for your participation. The goal of this study is to better understand what happens when people receive feedback, as you did in this study. Three factors are of interest: perceived source positivity, feedback positivity, and self-esteem. The aim is to understand how these factors affect the way people see themselves. To answer this question, there were some things we could not discuss with you in advance.

You may have answered questions about self-esteem in the prescreen you took at the beginning of the semester. Source positivity is whether you, the feedback recipient, thought that the person evaluating you was a positive or negative evaluator. To find out about how this affected your self-perceptions, the research assistant told you that I was either a hard or easy evaluator. We randomly determined which information you were given. To find out how people are affected by positive versus negative feedback, it was necessary to give half of the participants positive feedback on how they did on the Social Awareness Task, and half of the participants negative feedback. Your feedback and score were completely random, fake, and were determined before you arrived. No matter how you answered the Social Awareness Task, you would have received the same feedback. There were only two types of feedback given out: positive and negative. The Social Awareness Task is not a real psychological measure and does not actually measure anything. This task was made up specifically for this study to appear to be a real test. The test is made up of pictures found by the researcher, and they are not at all related to social awareness. Again, the score and feedback that you were given had absolutely nothing to do with you, your abilities, or your performance. The situation was carefully constructed to be believable to all participants, because it was important that participants react naturally to things that happened in the experiment. If people know what researchers are looking for, they tend to act differently.

You should also be aware of an effect that has occurred in studies like this called the perseverance effect. This is when people who receive positive feedback tend to rate themselves more positively than people who receive negative feedback, even after they have been told that the feedback was fake. Sometimes people's beliefs persist even after debriefing because they generate other evidence that explains the feedback they received. Please make sure to avoid thinking this way. If you have any questions remaining about how false the score and feedback you received are, please ask the researcher before you leave. Research has shown that explaining the perseverance effect to participants eliminates its effect.

Data obtained in this study will be kept confidential within the limits allowed by law. Your name and identifying information will be kept separate from your responses, which will be stored using a participant number on a restricted, password-protected server. Furthermore, any publications resulting from this study will not include any information that could possibly identify you.

I ask that you help keep the details of this study confidential. If participants are informed of the purpose and details of this study prior to their involvement, the data will be skewed and thus unusable. I thank you for your discretion.

Your contribution to this study is greatly appreciated. If participation in this study causes you to experience any distress, you can contact the Psychological Service Center located on the first floor (Room 126) of the Psychology Building by calling (901) 678-2147, or the Career and Psychological Counseling Center located on the second floor (Rooms 211 & 214) of Wilder Tower by calling (901) 678-2068. If an after-hours crisis occurs, dial (901) 678-HELP (4357) and ask for a counselor.

If you are interested in the results of this study or have questions, please feel free to contact the primary researcher, Lauren Spencer, at [lpnrcer2@memphis.edu](mailto:lpnrcer2@memphis.edu). Furthermore, if you have any complaints, concerns, or comments about this particular study, feel free to contact Dr. Ronnie Priest, Chair of the Institutional Review Board at (901) 678-2533.

Thank you, once again, for your participation!

## Appendix 6

### Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

BELOW IS A LIST OF STATEMENTS DEALING WITH YOUR GENERAL FEELINGS ABOUT YOURSELF. IF YOU **STRONGLY AGREE**, CIRCLE SA. IF YOU **AGREE** WITH THE STATEMENT, CIRCLE A. IF YOU **DISAGREE**, CIRCLE D. IF YOU **STRONGLY DISAGREE**, CIRCLE SD.

**1. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.**

SA            A            D            SD

**2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.**

SA            A            D            SD

**3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.**

SA            A            D            SD

**4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.**

SA            A            D            SD

**5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.**

SA            A            D            SD

**6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.**

SA            A            D            SD

**7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.**

SA            A            D            SD

**8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.**

SA            A            D            SD

**9. I certainly feel useless at times.**

SA            A            D            SD

**10. At times I think I am no good at all.**

SA            A            D            SD

## Appendix 7

### Self-Perception Measure

Please read each statement and choose the answer that describes how true the statement is.

1. I am often unaware when someone is upset with me.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True			Completely True

2. I think of myself as practical.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True			Completely True

3. I can sense how others feel.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True			Completely True

4. My mood changes more frequently than most people's.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True			Completely True

5. I do my best work when I am under pressure.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True			Completely True

6. I am aware of the feelings of the people I am with.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True			Completely True

7. I have more energy than most people.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True			Completely True



Appendix 7 (Continued)

8. The process is more important than the end result.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True		Completely True	
9. I am an artistic person.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True		Completely True	
10. If someone in my circle of friends is distressed, I am usually the first one to notice.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True		Completely True	
11. I think about the future a lot.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True		Completely True	
12. I have a difficult time making decisions.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True		Completely True	
13. I get distracted easily.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True		Completely True	
14. I am naturally good at relating to people.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True		Completely True	

### Appendix 7 (Continued)

15. I am good at coming up with original ideas.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True		Completely True	
16. I use all of my time in a productive way.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True		Completely True	
17. It is easy for me to understand the emotions of others.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True		Completely True	
18. I have a natural need to understand why things are the way they are.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True		Completely True	
19. I can tell how people feel about me.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True		Completely True	
20. I am more interested in the big picture than details.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completely False			Somewhat False			Somewhat True		Completely True	

## Appendix 8

### Manipulation Check Survey

#### Manipulation Check Survey

	Completely Inaccurate	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	Completely Accurate
How accurate was your feedback from the Social Awareness task?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Explain the factors that contributed to the feedback you received on the Social Awareness task.  
(text entry)

	Extremely Negative	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	Extremely Positive
How positive or negative was the feedback you received?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Hard Judge	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	Easy Judge
Where does the person who judged your answers fall on the following scale?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What percentage of people do you think scored lower than you?  
(text entry)

Why do you think those people scored lower than you?  
(text entry)

Why do you think some people scored higher than you?  
(text entry)