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How to cite

KRINGS, Rabea et al. Subtly offending feedback. In: Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 2015, vol. 45, n° 4, p. 191–202. doi: 10.1111/jasp.12287

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:98440>

Publication DOI: [10.1111/jasp.12287](https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12287)

Subtly offending feedback

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doi: 10.1111/jasp.12287

Abstract

Providing acceptable negative feedback is difficult because it may threaten the receiver's self-esteem. Studies have established that destructive feedback elicits stronger negative reactions than constructive feedback. However, these destructive conditions were quite strong, implying a clear threat to the self. Because of the importance of protecting one's self-concept, negative evaluations might be provoked by more subtle cues. Such cues should also be detected by observers.

We developed three variants of subtly offending feedback in which mistakes appeared disproportionately serious. In an experimental pilot study, 132 student observers judged the fairness of feedback given to another student. The subtly offending conditions were evaluated as less fair than constructive feedback but as more fair than destructive feedback.

Introduction

It is well established that destructive criticism induces negative evaluations of the feedback and its source as well as negative emotions such as anger. Although effects on motivation and performance depend on personal characteristics (Raver, Jensen, Lee, & O'Reilly, 2012), negative consequences can be expected in many cases because destructive criticism is likely to focus the receiver's attention on the self (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). A focus on the self, in turn, may induce performance deficits both in terms of task performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) and in terms of extra-role behavior (i.e., lower organizational citizenship behavior or higher counterproductive behavior; Raver et al., 2012). Because of its potential negative consequences, giving negative feedback is a difficult and delicate task (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Many people, including supervisors, therefore avoid giving negative feedback, and employees often avoid receiving negative feedback to protect their feelings of self-worth (Baumeister, 1996; Crocker & Park, 2004; Larson, 1989; Semmer, Jacobshagen, Meier, & Elfering, 2007). To avoid or minimize defensive reactions and to enable face-saving, and thus to increase acceptance, rules for giving negative feedback have been proposed. In addition to some rules that refer to the organizational context (e.g., regularity and confidentiality), Baron (1988, 1990, 1993) describes the following characteristics: "Negative feedback that is specific, considerate in tone, and contains no threats or statements attributing poor performance to internal causes does not reduce self-set goals or

feelings of self-efficacy. In contrast, negative feedback that is general, inconsiderate in tone, contains threats, and attributes poor performance to internal causes does indeed yield such decrement" (Baron, 1988, p. 205). To summarize Baron's feedback rules, it is important that feedback be specific, considerate, and allows external attributions.

Two theoretical approaches appear especially pertinent in the context of feedback acceptance: fairness/injustice and attribution theory. The fairness approach suggests that inconsiderate feedback, which is harsh and may contain derogatory remarks or even insults, can appear unfair. More specifically, inconsiderate feedback is an instance of relational (procedural or interactional) injustice (Blader & Tyler, 2005), which implies violations of one's worth and dignity and thus, one's sense of self (Bies, 2001; Blader & Tyler, 2005). Attribution is important in terms of locus, controllability, and stability (Weiner, 1985). Attribution theory suggests that messages are emotionally hurtful when people think that something is their own fault (internal locus), when they cannot control the situation (uncontrollability), and when they think that the situation will not change over time (stability; Hareli & Hess, 2008). However, controllability also may lead to being blamed; for instance, someone who appears not to invest the effort that others expect may be perceived as lacking in conscientiousness, interest, and reliability (Weiner, 2006). Attribution and fairness are not independent of one another. Thus, receiving feedback that implies an attribution to a lack of competence or reliability may be perceived as constituting an unjustified accusation and thus as unfair (cf. Bies,

2001). Likewise, feedback that is perceived as overly harsh may be perceived as implying that the feedback giver attributes mistakes to an unacceptably low level of effort (Weiner, 2006), and exaggerating the consequences of a mistake may be perceived as implying that the feedback giver is attributing faults to missing competence in terms of one's being able to anticipate the consequences of one's actions.

Both inconsiderate feedback and feedback that attributes bad outcomes to stable, internal, and uncontrollable causes are likely to hurt the receiver's self-esteem. Relational justice is intrinsically related to one's sense of self-worth (Bies, 2001; Blader & Tyler, 2005), and an attribution of poor outcomes to internal, stable, and uncontrollable (and sometimes controllable) causes implies a derogatory evaluation. Specifically, such an attribution implies an evaluation of incompetence (cannot do better) that threatens self-efficacy, which can be seen as the competence component of self-esteem (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001). Such an attribution may also imply a lack of motivation or reliability (could do better, but does not appear to care; cf. Hareli & Hess, 2008; Weiner, 2006), which can threaten the self-worth/self-liking aspect of self-esteem (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001). It therefore can be expected that destructive feedback is likely to evoke negative affective reactions and low feedback acceptance.

A number of studies have confirmed these expectations. Baron (1988, 1990) showed how destructive feedback induced negative emotions (e.g., anger) and lower self-efficacy. He operationalized destructive feedback in a manner that violated all his principles of constructive feedback (e.g., "I wasn't impressed at all. The whole thing needs to be fixed. I had the impression that he/she didn't try much at all. [Or maybe it's just a lack of talent.]" [Baron 1988, p. 200]). Hareli and Hess (2008) focused on attributions, suggesting to their participants that someone had attributed poor performance to different combinations of locus, stability, and controllability. With regard to hurt feelings, their results indicated that "an explanation for failure that points to personal characteristics of the achiever that are relatively permanent and unchangeable presents the most undesirable situation . . ." (Hareli & Hess, 2008, p. 868). Note that their study did not involve harsh expressions, thus demonstrating that attribution alone may suffice for inducing negative affect. In contrast, Raver et al. (2012) focused on inconsiderate feedback without suggesting a specific attribution. Their destructive feedback contains phrases such as "Your presentation was ineffective. I think the analysis you presented was incomplete and careless, and it should be improved," and participants are told that they overheard the feedback giver saying "that he's never seen such a useless presentation" (Raver et al., p. 186). This feedback affected a number of outcomes, including emotions (anger) and more negative evaluations of the source of the feedback in terms of trust, blame, and attribution of intent to harm.

These studies demonstrate the effects of destructive feedback, and they show that attribution alone (without being harsh) and being harsh alone (without explicitly suggesting attributions) already suffice. The emotional reactions shown (hurt and anger) and the negative evaluation of the feedback giver suggest that destructive feedback is perceived as unfair. Note also that the violation of Baron's feedback principles was quite severe. It is therefore not surprising that destructive feedback had strong effects in those experiments, and differences between the constructive and the destructive conditions were not unexpected.

For several reasons, we suspect that this type of heavily destructive feedback is not necessary to evoke negative reactions and that there may be more subtle manners of delivering "destructive" feedback. First, given the importance of maintaining a positive image of oneself (e.g., Baumeister, 1996), many people are sensitive to minimal cues that could threaten the self (Bargh, 1982; Gray, Ambady, Lowenthal, & Deldin, 2004). We therefore suspect that many people may detect rather subtle suggestions that a feedback giver does not esteem them highly, even in the absence of direct suggestions of internal and stable attributions and even when feedback is delivered in a friendly manner and avoids harsh delivery. Second, research on fairness has shown that many leaders "believe they are fair, and deem fairness principles as mere common sense" (Skarlicki & Latham, 2005, p. 505). As outlined above, constructive criticism is strongly related to issues of justice and fairness, and it appears fair to assume that the commitment to fairness also includes a commitment to give feedback in a fair manner (after all, it does not appear difficult to assess Baron's destructive feedback as destructive). Furthermore, superiors who employ the type of destructive feedback used in the studies by Baron (1990) and Raver and colleagues (2012) run the risk of developing a rather bad reputation. Research on leader-member exchange theory (Schermyly, Meyer, & Dämmer, 2013) and supervisor support (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002) shows, however, that generally, people believe they have a good relationship with their supervisors and feel supported by them. It appears unlikely that employees would evaluate their relationships with their supervisors as positive if the supervisors often gave negative feedback in a harsh manner. For these reasons, we suggest that there may be more subtle manners of giving offending feedback than the rather strong violations of feedback principles typically used in research. Such subtly offending feedback would not contain direct internal attributions and explicit suggestions of incompetence or lack of reliability, nor would such feedback be harsh in tone or contain direct accusations. Rather, such messages would have to be indirect, implied rather than directly expressed, and delivered in a friendly manner.

Construing subtly offending feedback

Research has not focused on subtly offending feedback, and we could not identify any study that examined it. We therefore were required to develop such manners of delivering feedback ourselves. How could subtly offending feedback be conceived? Because the requirement is that there is not a *direct* derogative message, both harsh phrases and a harsh tone had to be avoided as well as direct statements regarding attributions. Rather, subtly offending feedback should *indirectly* suggest attributions by the feedback giver that imply a negative evaluation, either in terms of competence or in terms of motivation and dependability; however, both the phrases used and the tone in which they are delivered should be friendly and polite. We believe that the best way to achieve this aim was by making mistakes appear exceedingly grave. Making mistakes appear excessively grave suggests an attribution of incompetence or, alternatively, of a complete lack of motivation and willingness to invest effort. Focusing on mistakes that are so trivial that emphasizing them implies either a malicious intent by the feedback giver (i.e., an intent to harass the receiver) or a judgment by the feedback giver that avoiding such mistakes can be expected from anyone, implying that those who do not avoid them are either quite incompetent or completely lack motivation.

Based on these considerations, we developed three types of subtly offending feedback: overkill, exaggeration, and banality. (a) *Overkill* refers to an overly long and excessive dwelling on relatively minor details. By maintaining the focus on mistakes, the mistakes appear quite serious even if they actually are not. Reasons why something was a mistake or why it should have been avoided are listed extensively; as a consequence, it appears so obvious that something was a mistake that the performance of the feedback receiver appears increasingly poor, and one must wonder why the feedback receiver did not notice this problem to begin with. The conclusion that the receiver should have been expected to notice and avoid the mistakes that are dwelled upon is never made explicit; however, it is suggested indirectly, and an internal attribution is increasingly implied. One example of an overkill feedback is “Tables of the SPSS output should not be taken for your course paper without any adjustment. The most important results must be chosen, and you must bring them into an adjusted and reader-friendly form. SPSS edits the data in a manner so that people who are used to statistics can understand it. Those outputs list many details. Depending on the question, many details are not relevant. If you take these tables without editing them, it is difficult for the reader to follow your thoughts. Readers are going to become confused and maybe try to interpret some numbers individually in a manner that is not adequate. If you show your results in an edited way, readers see the most important results and relations in a clear way.” (b) *Exaggeration* also makes mistakes

look bigger, but this time by explicitly exaggerating their significance. Declaring a manuscript to be poor simply because of mistakes in punctuation is an example: The importance of these mistakes is exaggerated. Making a mistake appear more serious than it is by exaggerating its significance suggests that the student either did not understand basic concepts and their importance or did not care. The implication is that the student is either incompetent or careless and unmotivated. Again, however, these implications are not explicit. An example of exaggeration is “I was really surprised to see that you did not follow the formal criteria for the references. The dots in the reference section were not always set in the right place. Setting the dots correctly is a fundamental requirement for scientific work.” (c) *Banality* refers to declaring a mistake to be so trivial that it could have been avoided easily, implying that the feedback giver certainly would have expected the receiver not to make such a mistake; anyone would be expected even under nonoptimal conditions not to make such mistakes. Thus, the receiver is depicted as performing below even minimal standards, and a benign interpretation in terms of insufficient effort is rendered unlikely because avoiding these mistakes is presented as not really requiring much effort. Consequently, the receiver appears either unmotivated because he or she did not even bother to meet minimal standards, or incompetent. An example of banality is “The structure of your paper is problematic, but that problem could have easily been solved. You could have simply changed the sequence of your chapters.”

In sum, such subtly offending feedback makes the recipient look rather stupid, or at least unmotivated, without directly saying so. If those subtle cues are picked up, they should be sufficient to ensure that the feedback will be evaluated as unfair even though the feedback giver is quite friendly. Because many people are sensitive to minimal cues that could threaten the self (Bargh, 1982; Gray et al., 2004), we expect that such subtle cues should suffice to induce a lower evaluation of feedback fairness and acceptability compared with constructive feedback but higher compared with explicitly destructive feedback.

Testing feedback perceptions

Testing how feedback is perceived and reacted to is a delicate task because it is difficult to ensure identical treatment for everyone and to simultaneously ensure ecological validity. Specifically, if feedback is given on actual performance, performance differences are likely. In the case of participants who perform well, it is difficult to give destructive feedback because the participants may not perceive destructive feedback as credible. Various ways to circumvent this problem have been developed involving different degrees of actual performance and actual feedback. When participants actually must perform, tasks must be chosen for which there are no

clear and obvious performance criteria; tasks involving creative solutions are an example. Thus, participants in Baron's (1988) study had to plan a campaign for introducing a new product; in such a situation, many types of feedback may be perceived as validly reflecting the feedback giver's evaluation. Another possibility is to give feedback in a comparative form (e.g., you were at/below/above average performance); however, in such a situation, evaluations may well run counter to participants' own estimation, thus undermining credibility (Nease, Mudgett, & Quiñones, 1999; Nummenmaa & Niemi, 2004). Some studies use vignettes in which participants must imagine receiving feedback; the actual task is never performed. Thus, Hareli and Hess (2008) as well as Raver et al. (2012), asked participants to imagine having given a presentation and receiving feedback. The situations used may be directly relevant to the participants (e.g., students imagining having submitted a paper; Hareli & Hess, 2008), or it may not be relevant (e.g., students imagining working for a company; Baron, 1988; Raver et al., 2012).

In terms of criterion variables, studies have assessed evaluations in terms of fairness (Baron, 1988) or perceived lack of sensitivity (Raver et al., 2012); emotional reactions such as anger (Baron, 1988) or hurt feelings, shame and guilt (Hareli & Hess, 2008); and performance intentions (intent to invest effort) and actual performance (Raver et al., 2012).

Thus, if one wants to investigate reactions to feedback in a controlled situation, it is nearly impossible to create a situation in which participants actually perform a task that is representative of tasks they perform in their everyday lives and receive direct feedback on, and for which actual reactions of participants to these conditions are assessed. Typically, at least some of these conditions are only imagined (Nummenmaa & Niemi, 2004).

One manner in which to create realism in such studies is to have participants *observe* a realistic situation. Such a scenario is likely to reduce their personal involvement; however, if the situation involves people belonging to their in-group, then involvement may be increased by processes of social identity. As is well known from research on third-party reactions to injustice, people tend to form judgments regarding the manner in which others are treated, and they often react in a similar, albeit weaker, fashion than those who are directly involved. Identifying with the person involved is one of the factors determining these reactions (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). It is plausible to assume that identification with the person involved is most important for affective reactions, such as anger or hurt, although people may react with outrage for reasons of principle (cf. Folger's 2001 account of in terms of "deontic justice"), whereas evaluative judgments (e.g., regarding the fairness of feedback) that reflect the appraisal the affective reactions are based on (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004) can be formed even if one is relatively distant emotionally.

The current study

We argue that many people are quite sensitive even to minimal cues that are related to the self (Bargh, 1982; Gray et al., 2004). Because feedback regarding one's performance relates to the self (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), the established feedback rules (e.g., Baron, 1988) appear to be insufficient to minimize negative evaluations. Rather, subtle elements, as described above, may evoke reactions, even if Baron's feedback rules are basically followed. We developed manners in which to deliver such subtly offending feedback in terms of overkill, exaggeration, and banality; however, because there is no model for these types of subtly offending feedback in the literature, we must demonstrate that they are indeed perceived, and induce a more negative evaluation than constructive feedback. After some pretesting, we therefore decided to conduct a pilot study, expecting that such subtly offending feedback would be judged as less fair than constructive feedback but fairer than strongly destructive feedback as used by Baron (1988) or Raver et al. (2012).

For this first test, it was necessary to weigh the pros and cons of the different approaches described above (see "Testing feedback perceptions"). Because it was a pilot study, we did not want to expose our participants to situations that may involve them strongly in terms of hurt feelings (e.g., by telling them they did poorly on actual work). Simultaneously, we wanted to create a scenario that included nonverbal and paraverbal elements because we wanted to ensure that there would be no signs of harsh criticism or a derogatory attitude in the behavior of the person giving the feedback. Finally, we wanted to use a scenario that was familiar and relevant to our participants, thus fostering ecological validity and capitalizing on the third-party justice effect (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004).

We therefore used a scenario in which student participants watched a film in which a professor gave feedback to a student, and the participants were asked to judge the quality of the feedback given.

We expected that subtle offending feedback would be less well evaluated in terms of fairness than optimal negative (i.e., constructive) feedback but better evaluated than the destructive negative feedback that strongly violates Baron's rules, as presented in the research by Baron (1988, 1990, 1993) and Raver and colleagues (2012). Because our additional feedback conditions (overkill, exaggeration, and banality) all were intended to represent our concept of "subtly offending" feedback and because they represented a first attempt at operationalizing this concept, we did not develop hypotheses regarding the differences among them. Therefore, our hypotheses were the following:

Hypothesis 1. Optimal negative (constructive) feedback receives the best evaluation in terms of fairness and differs from all other conditions.

Hypothesis 2. Destructive feedback receives the lowest evaluation of fairness and differs from all other conditions.

Hypothesis 3. Evaluations for subtly offending feedback (i.e., the conditions of banality, overkill, and exaggeration) in terms of fairness are (a) better than for destructive feedback and (b) lower than for optimal negative (constructive) feedback.

Methods

Participants

One hundred and thirty-two undergraduate students from a Swiss University participated in this pilot study. Participants' majors included economics, biology, chemistry, engineering, and psychology. Of the 132 subjects, 86 were female (65%), and 46 were male (35%); mean age was 22.45 ($SD = 5.67$).

Procedure

Setting

Participants were led to a neutral room in groups of 20–25. The room contained no pictures, no colored walls, or any other materials except for a television set, which was required for the experiment. Participants received a test manual containing the questionnaires and were asked to read the instructions carefully. After that, participants watched a video. On this video, participants saw a photograph of a man who was introduced as a professor giving feedback to a student concerning a course paper, and they heard the professor give the feedback. This feedback was divided into seven parts: (1) Introductory remarks, (2) general impression, (3) structure, (4) theory, (5) method, (6) results, and (7) formal criteria. For each section, the student on the video received one type of negative feedback. Neutral feedback was used for the introductory remark, providing an anchor for the ratings of the other feedback conditions. For the other six components, each group of participants received a different sequence of negative feedback. The sequence of the aspects covered was identical for all participants; however, feedback conditions

varied to eliminate the effects of chronological order. Each group was presented each subtly offending condition as well as the destructive condition once, and an optimal negative condition twice (see the rows in Table 1). Across groups, each condition had to appear at every position (i.e., in every line in Table 1) so that the feedback conditions were balanced. Furthermore, only three not optimal conditions (subtly offending or destructive feedback) directly followed each other to protect students from negative consequences. To exemplify this balanced design, the first group received the following feedback sequence: neutral condition, exaggeration, optimal negative feedback, overkill, optimal negative feedback 2, banality, and destructive feedback; the second group received the sequence neutral condition, optimal negative feedback, exaggeration, banality, optimal negative feedback 2, destructive feedback, and overkill. After each situation, the screen turned blank and the participants rated the fairness of the feedback.

Material

Variation of feedback conditions

As outlined above, we constructed three different conditions of subtly offending feedback: banality, overkill, and exaggeration. In these subtly offending feedback conditions, the professor was quite friendly and did not directly attack the students or their competence. Therefore, these conditions were constructed in a manner that did not violate Baron's (1990) feedback rules for constructive feedback, yet indirectly contained possible threats to the recipient's self-concept and therefore were likely to be evaluated as unfair (de Hoog, 2013). Furthermore, conditions of constructive (negative but in an optimal manner) and destructive feedback (strong violation of Baron's, e.g., 1990 rules) were constructed. An example of destructive feedback is "Unfortunately, you did not understand at all how to organize an empirical paper." An example of constructive optimal negative feedback is "In general, your work is ok. The theoretical aspects are relevant, but you should list more theories that explain the general mechanisms." Participants received optimal negative

Table 1 Balanced Study Design

Content	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6
Introductory remarks	Neutral feedback (anchor)	Neutral feedback (anchor)	Neutral feedback (anchor)	Neutral feedback (anchor)	Neutral feedback (anchor)	Neutral feedback (anchor)
General impression	Exaggeration	Optimal	Banality	Optimal	Overkill	Destructive
Structure	Optimal	Exaggeration	Optimal	Overkill	Destructive	Banality
Theory	Overkill	Banality	Exaggeration	Destructive	Optimal	Optimal
Method	Optimal	Optimal	Destructive	Exaggeration	Banality	Overkill
Results	Banality	Destructive	Overkill	Optimal	Exaggeration	Optimal
Formal criteria	Destructive	Overkill	Optimal	Banality	Optimal	Exaggeration

feedbacks on two different aspects of the paper so that they did not receive the impression that the paper was generally bad. All conditions were presented in an identical manner, and the professor gave his feedback in a friendly fashion. The conditions were pretested to ensure that they differed in terms of fairness evaluation.

Before participants received the negative feedback, neutral feedback was given in terms of the introductory remarks by the professor “Your research question is interesting and provides good insight into psychology. Furthermore, it presents a good overview of different aspects of psychology.”

The difference between the subtly offending conditions and the optimal negative feedback is that the latter only stated the problem and gave advice regarding how the paper could be improved. This condition is quite similar to the constructive feedback condition used by Raver et al. (2012). In contrast, the subtly offending conditions contain information that could be interpreted as indirectly threatening the recipient’s self-esteem, although nothing is said that directly states internal attributions; rather, this information is suggested indirectly by “blowing up mistakes” (overkill and exaggeration) or by suggesting that the paper is below even minimal standards, which implies incompetence or a complete lack of carefulness. In the destructive condition, it is suggested rather directly that the student lacks the competence required to write a course paper. Like the constructive feedback, this condition is based on Raver et al.’s (2012) and Baron’s (1990) conditions.

Our study extends beyond previous studies by comparing not only the two conditions of destructive and constructive negative feedback, but adding a third condition (in three variants) adhering to feedback rules yet containing subtle, indirect threats that should evoke more negative reactions than the optimal condition. A prior test of the conditions of this pilot study yielded results consistent with our hypotheses in that the subtly offending versions were judged more favorable than the destructive feedback but less favorable than the constructive feedback.¹

¹The conditions of this pilot-study were tested with two samples of psychology students. One sample received a written version of the feedback conditions ($n = 60$); after each feedback they had to state one positive and one negative sentence in relation to each feedback so that we could analyze if participants evaluated the negative aspects of each feedback in terms we planned to conduct it. The other sample tested a preliminary version of the current study ($n = 157$), testing the whole experiment in a shorter version (participants did not get all conditions). Regarding the mean, it could be shown that the subtly offending conditions ($M = 3.32$, $SD = .85$) were evaluated in between the optimal negative feedback ($M = 3.51$, $SD = .77$) and the destructive condition ($M = 2.50$, $SD = .62$), supporting our assumption, $F(2, 906) = 70.67$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .14$. Furthermore, participants also had to state one positive and one negative sentence in relation to each feedback. After analyzing these statements, the conditions were slightly adapted for this study.

As an illustration of the various types of feedback, we present the different feedback on the theory aspect of the paper in the Appendix.

Questionnaire

After each feedback situation, participants evaluated the feedback using a list of adjectives. The lead-in phrase read, “I perceived this feedback as . . .” and the list that followed contained the adjectives “fair, pleasant, frustrating, informative, instructive, arrogant/overbearing, condescending, cynical/mocking, appreciative, cooperative, respectful, motivating.” The adjectives were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Negative words were reverse-coded so that higher values indicated a more positive evaluation. Cronbach’s alpha for the total scale was .96. Principal component analysis yielded one factor, with item loadings ranging from .56 to .90.

At the end of all seven parts, participants answered a general questionnaire concerning demographic variables, such as gender and age. Furthermore, they were asked if they could imagine a situation similar to the one on the video, if they could imagine themselves in this situation, and if they could identify with the student, rating-format ranges from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Of the participants, 99% could identify with the student and the situation (answering at least that they could identify with the student and the situation to a moderate degree). Therefore, the prerequisites for third-party effects in terms of empathy and social identity can be regarded as achieved. After the general questionnaire, participants were debriefed.

Analytical procedure

Because participants responded several times to different feedback, we used a 7 (introductory remark, general impression, structure, theory, method, results, formal criteria) \times 7 (neutral feedback, optimal negative feedback, optimal negative feedback 2, overkill, banality, exaggeration, destructive feedback) repeated measures design (general linear model with repeated measures of one factor consisting of seven levels). Using a mixed design has the advantage that fewer participants are needed in comparison with a between design. Furthermore, random differences between persons can be minimized. In comparison with a within design, order effects can be minimized. Gender and age were used as covariates; thus, estimated marginal means were controlled for gender and age. When the analysis indicated differences in the estimated marginal means of the various feedback conditions, an analysis of planned contrasts was performed using Bonferroni corrections to reduce the accumulation of α -errors as a consequence of multiple pairwise comparisons.

Results

Means and standard deviations of the different feedback conditions and estimated marginal means are presented in Table 2.

Because sphericity was not given, we used Greenhouse–Geisser correction. The results show that the different feedback conditions influence the fairness evaluation of the feedback, $F(4.76, 576.20) = 8.98, p < .001; \eta_p^2 = .07$. The covariates gender and age did not affect feedback evaluation ($p > .10$). Moreover, an additional analysis was done to test if there are any order effects. Results indicated that it does not matter in which order the feedback conditions were presented ($p > .10$). Furthermore, there were no between-group differences in results. As indicated by the estimated marginal means (Table 2), the neutral feedback was evaluated highest, followed by an optimal negative feedback condition, and destructive feedback received the worst fairness evaluation. The three “subtle” conditions were in between. Of these, overkill feedback received the best fairness evaluation, followed by banality and exaggeration. All conditions differed in a statistically significant manner from one another, with two exceptions: banality and exaggeration did not differ, nor do overkill and the second optimal negative feedback condition, leading to only partial support for hypothesis 1. Planned contrasts are displayed in Table 2. Destructive feedback was evaluated as significantly less fair than all other feedback conditions, confirming Hypothesis 2. Finally, the three subtly offending conditions were evaluated as significantly more fair than the destructive condition, but significantly less fair than the optimal conditions (except for overkill and the second optimal feedback), largely confirming Hypothesis 3. Concerning differences between the subtle conditions, banality, and exaggeration did not differ from one another; however, overkill was significantly more positively evaluated in terms of fairness than banality and exaggeration. When we combined (a) the two optimal conditions and (b) the three subtly offending feedback conditions using the mean of the specific conditions, results were like expected. The fairness evaluation

of subtly offending feedback ($M = 3.02, SD = .57$) lay in between of optimal negative feedback ($M = 3.93, SD = .45$) and destructive feedback, $M = 2.37, SD = .66; F(1.94, 246.34) = 33.26, p < .001; \eta_p^2 = .21$.

Discussion

We argued that feedback need not be destructive in terms of strong violations of feedback rules to be perceived as unfair. Because the proposed mechanism (as in fairness in general) relates to threats to self-esteem, and because maintenance of self-esteem is important to most people (Baumeister, 1996), people are especially sensitive to subtle cues signaling devaluation (Bargh, 1982; Gray et al., 2004) even if the feedback is not destructive in the sense of Baron (e.g., 1988) or Raver et al. (2012). Our results show that fairness evaluation of subtly offending feedback is indeed lower than evaluations of optimal negative feedback but higher than extremely destructive feedback. These results not only confirm our assumption that people respond to low-level threats with considerable sensitivity (Gray et al., 2004), they also demonstrate that the general feedback rules provided by Baron are not sufficient to minimize negative evaluation of feedback. It is not surprising that destructive feedback, which strongly violates the rules of good negative feedback by criticizing the qualities and capabilities of the feedback receiver in a direct and derogatory manner and by directly and explicitly suggesting stable internal attributions (Baron, 1988, 1990, 1993), is evaluated as more unfair than constructive feedback. However, our pilot study shows that it is not sufficient to distinguish between constructive and destructive negative feedback; rather, many behaviors that may appear rather harmless at first sight (e.g., making rather small mistakes appear a little more serious than they are while maintaining a friendly tone) may suffice to evoke at least somewhat negative reactions.

We did not expect that the subtly offending feedback conditions would differ from one another; however, overkill was evaluated as fairer than exaggeration and banality. In hindsight, it appears possible that the banality condition suggests

Table 2 Means, Estimated Marginal Means, Standard Deviations, Standard Errors, and the Comparison of the Feedback Conditions: Planned Contrasts

	<i>M</i> (EMM)	<i>SD</i> (<i>SE</i>)	1	2	3	4	5	6	Significant differences
1 Neutral (anchor)	4.31 (4.31)	.41 (.04)	—						1 > 2–7
2 Optimal 1	3.99 (3.99)	.65 (.06)	.33***	—					1 > 2 > 3–7
3 Optimal 2	3.58 (3.56)	.66 (.06)	.74***	.41***	—				1, 2 > 3 > 4, 6, 7
4 Banality	2.94 (2.94)	.90 (.08)	1.37***	1.04***	.63***	—			1, 2, 3, 5 > 4 > 7
5 Overkill	3.33 (3.33)	.88 (.08)	.99***	.66***	.25	.38***	—		1, 2 > 5 > 4, 6, 7
6 Exaggeration	2.77 (2.77)	.85 (.08)	1.55***	1.22***	.81***	.18	.56***	—	1, 2, 3, 5 > 6 > 7
7 Destructive	2.37 (2.37)	.66 (.06)	1.94***	1.62***	1.21***	.58***	.96***	.39***	7 < 1–6

Note. EMM = estimated marginal means; this table presents the estimated marginal mean differences independent of the algebraic sign. The direction of the planned contrasts can be seen in the last column. Estimated marginal means are controlled for gender and age. Bonferroni correction was used. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

more clearly that the feedback receiver must be quite incompetent or careless to make mistakes that are so easily avoided, implying that the feedback receiver is unable or unwilling to comply with even minimal standards, thus constituting quite a harsh evaluation. Similarly, in the exaggeration condition, the consequences of small mistakes are depicted as so grave that stupidity or carelessness is a rather obvious conclusion. By contrast, dwelling on mistakes may more easily be perceived as a sign of repetitive behavior which, although annoying, is not as threatening as the two other conditions and is more easily ignored. However, these conclusions are rather speculative at the moment. An alternative explanation is that our operationalization of the concept of overkill was not optimal. In other words, at this point we cannot decide if we are dealing with a conceptual problem or with a problem of implementation. In sum, our general conceptual considerations appear well supported; however, the specifics may require adjustment in terms of theory, or in terms of operationalization, or both.

We hypothesized the central psychological mechanism to be a threat to self-esteem associated with a lack of fairness, leading to negative emotional reactions. Such reasoning has repeatedly been supported (e.g., cf. Baron, 1988, 1990; Baumeister, 1996; Raver et al., 2012); however, we did not test the entire chain. Because we focused on an evaluation of the feedback in terms of fairness, our results are in line with our theoretical considerations; however, they empirically demonstrate only one element involved. Furthermore, we did not assess the reactions to feedback of those who received the feedback. Doing so would not only have been difficult in terms of feedback credibility (e.g., criticizing the performance of students who perceive themselves as good performers), but it also appeared premature because we were unsure whether we would induce strong emotions based on a concept that had not been sufficiently tested. Testing the evaluations of perceivers implies that emotional reactions would be weaker. Simultaneously, it is well known that observers often empathize with others, especially if they can identify with them (third-party justice, Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). Our participants were students, as was the receiver of the feedback; thus, conditions were favorable for rendering a common social identity salient (cf. de Hoog, 2013; Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999); indeed, our data showed that our student participants did identify with the student receiving the feedback.

Strengths and limitations

A strength of this study is the experimental design, which allowed the control of the independent variable in terms of standardization. The balanced design also guaranteed that every participant received each feedback condition. One limitation is that the design was not completely balanced in that

all participants first received optimal feedback. One certainly can expect to receive different kinds of feedback to different aspects of one's work, but seven such conditions does not seem that realistic, lowering ecological validity. Furthermore, we could not completely standardize the feedback conditions in terms of length; thus, dwelling on mistakes requires more words than giving optimal feedback. Furthermore, although we believe that the mechanisms involved in subtly offending feedback would apply to other tasks as well, our study can confirm this claim only for the type of task and setting we used. In addition, there was only one "professor"; thus, we cannot ascertain whether certain characteristics of his behavior influenced reactions. We could also not control whether the gender of the professor influenced the evaluation of the feedback. It may be possible that people react to feedback by males and females differently. Such gender effects, as well as perceptions and interpretation of feedback cues in general, are likely to depend on the cultural background of the receiver. Thus, it is absolutely possible that feedback that is subtly offending for Swiss students may be perceived as perfectly normal in other countries or in cultures with different feedback rules and habits—or, conversely, that what is considered "subtle" in one culture may be perceived as rather direct in others. Our pilot study therefore only gives a first impression of how students in Switzerland react to these different types of negative feedback, and future studies would have to determine what constitutes subtly offending feedback in other countries. Furthermore, the feedback did not concern the students directly because they were only observers. Although this procedure has the advantage of minimizing threats to credibility, we cannot be sure that the students would react in an identical manner if the feedback concerned their own work. Conversely, what is known regarding third-party reactions suggests that reactions to personal feedback would be stronger than the reactions we observed; this aspect enhances the credibility of the effects we observed, especially in light of the strong identification of our participants with the feedback receiver (Gaertner, Sedikides, Vevea, & Iuzzini, 2002). A final weakness is that we cannot be sure of the extent to which we "exhausted" the possibilities for subtly offending feedback; it appears quite likely that there are more such possibilities. Furthermore, even within the three conceptual possibilities we tested, there may be more optimal manners of operationalizing them.

Theoretical implications

Confirming that destructive feedback receives the lowest evaluation is not a new contribution; such a confirmation can be perceived rather as a manipulation check demonstrating that we succeeded in devising feedback that can be considered destructive. In a similar vein, demonstrating that optimal feedback is evaluated as more fair replicates earlier research

and is basically a manipulation check for our formulations in these conditions. The unique contribution of our research is the subtle threats contained in feedback delivery; they were not stated explicitly or suggested by a derogatory manner of expressing the feedback, but rather were implied by dwelling on mistakes, exaggerating mistakes, or declaring them as quite easy to avoid. These results are consistent with approaches that emphasize the preferred accessibility of self-relevant information in general (Bargh, 1982; Gray et al., 2004) and with approaches that emphasize the special role of evaluative threat contained in self-relevant information (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Semmer et al., 2007); this includes threats that do not refer to the participants themselves, but to an in-group member (de Hoog, 2013). Consistent with the results of our pilot study, these approaches imply that people are sensitive not only to harsh threats that are clearly expressed, as in destructive feedback, but they also monitor messages for minor, subtle, and indirect cues for such threats. Notably, a move toward focusing more strongly on subtleties in social interactions can also be observed in other areas of organizational behavior; thus, investigators in the domain of counterproductive work behavior focus increasingly on incivility, which is a subtle form of counterproductive work behavior (Cortina, Magley, Hunter Williams, & Languard, 2001; Meier & Semmer, 2013).

Our results suggest that there are many manners in which feedback may communicate threats to the (collective) self. Our results further show that the manners in which these threats are communicated may be much more subtle than suggested thus far by research. This aspect has been widely neglected; rather, investigators used feedback that contained very obvious threats (Baron, 1990; Raver et al., 2012), or they explicitly told participants that someone had suggested an attribution of their failure in terms of internal and stable causes (Hareli & Hess, 2008). Our research helps to shed light on potential varieties of communication and thus may be a step in advancing theory to focus on the characteristics of subtly offending feedback.

Practical implications

Many supervisors may have good intentions and attempt to avoid unnecessary threats when giving feedback to their employees. Furthermore, many supervisors may well recognize that destructive feedback of the types used by Baron (1990) and Raver and colleagues (2012) is likely to hurt people and be ineffective in fostering behavior change. However, supervisors may not be aware to the same extent of the many subtle cues that convey potentially hurtful messages. Supervisors may believe they are acting correctly if they avoid rudeness and insults. For such leaders, leadership development courses that teach about destructive criticism in the

sense of Baron (1990) and Raver and colleagues (2012) may induce a deceptive sense of having no problems. Such leaders may react to information regarding destructive feedback by thinking, "I would never talk to my people like that!" and conclude that they were giving feedback in an optimal manner. Consequently, they may hurt people without realizing it, which, if occurring frequently, may have quite negative consequences (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Furthermore, they may interpret negative reactions to their feedback in terms of the personal characteristics of the feedback receiver and not recognize aspects of their own behavior that may have contributed to such negative reactions. Consequently, they may evaluate the feedback receiver more negatively and may even consider punishing him or her for his or her behavior (Baker, 1974; Skarlicki & Rupp, 2010). However, supervisors may also avoid giving accurate feedback to avoid conflict (Waung & Highhouse, 1997) or even avoid giving feedback altogether (Larson, 1989). It is therefore important to alert people, especially supervisors, to such subtle cues and to support them in recognizing and regulating these subtle cues, so that unnecessary threats to the self can be avoided. Note that we speak of "unnecessary" threats because it is most likely impossible to avoid such threats at all times; thus, there may be employees who react strongly to *any* negative feedback, even if it is delivered in the most considerate manner. In such situations, delivering the feedback may be unavoidable for supervisors even if it provokes negative reactions because the alternative of not delivering the feedback may be even worse. In addition, because our pilot study confirms that people also judge how in-group members are evaluated (Folger, 2001), training supervisors how to give optimal feedback should also include considering that non-optimal feedback to one individual may well threaten the social identity of others in terms of the collective self (Gaertner et al., 2002).

Future research

As mentioned above, we most likely did not exhaust the possibilities for communicating subtly offending feedback. Because people react rather sensitively to cues that relate to the self (Bargh, 1982; Gray et al., 2004), it is likely that there are more than three possibilities to communicate subtle offending feedback. Therefore, future research should study additional manners of offending the self in a subtle way, including nonverbal or paraverbal aspects. For instance, as our subtly offending feedback conditions did not contain any word with positive connotations, research could test what would change if some positive aspects were mentioned in addition to the subtle negative cues. Furthermore, research might test what would happen if the subtly offending feedback conditions constituted the majority of conditions, as compared with three of seven in our study. Research could also test to what extent nonverbal or paraverbal aspects could

aggravate, or attenuate, the effects of subtly offending feedback (e.g., a combination of optimal feedback in terms of content with a not-too-friendly attitude in terms voice and facial expression).

Thus, further research may well reveal many more manners of delivering subtly offending feedback, and many additional aspects to consider. In addition, there are also research needs regarding our specific concepts and their operationalization. For instance, given that our overkill condition was evaluated quite positively, the question remains whether that condition is as negative as we had thought or if another manner of operationalizing it (perhaps a bit stronger?) would show it to be as subtly offending as the other two conditions. Furthermore, it is important to analyze in what manners the subtly offending feedback conditions are alike and in what manners they differ from one another. It is also important to analyze in more detail the role of conditions being repeated. Our result that the optimal negative feedback was evaluated less fair the second time it appeared suggests that this type of optimal feedback may lose its constructive character over time. One manner in which to test this would be to utilize each condition twice.

Further research should also analyze the effects of personal negative feedback to ensure that similar effects would be observed if the individual self were directly (albeit subtly) threatened (Ellemers et al., 1999; Gaertner et al., 2002; Taşdemir, 2011). Because people would then be more personally involved, the effects should be stronger if participants receive direct feedback regarding their own performance (Gaertner et al., 2002). In this context, future research should also analyze the effects of personality characteristics, such as positive and negative affect or goal orientation. In addition, people high in self-enhancement, who tend to preserve their positive self-concepts by avoiding negative information about themselves, most likely would evaluate such negative feedback more negatively than people who pursue accurate self-knowledge and are therefore high in self-assessment, or people high in self-verification who should accept negative

feedback if it fits their self-concept (Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003; Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002). Conversely, another research direction may be to analyze strategies that help the *receivers* of such feedback interpret it in a manner that reduces the experienced threat to the self (e.g., interpreting nonoptimal types of feedback as a lack of social competence rather than bad intentions).

Moreover, future research should expand the focus to include real feedback situations in the context of work. We suspect that subtly offending feedback is much more common than explicitly destructive feedback; however, such a conclusion remains speculative. It is important to know which types of feedback are common in work settings, how often they occur, whether the effects are identical to those in the experimental condition, and how long they persist.

Final remarks

Our study represents but a first step in investigating the phenomenon of subtly offending feedback. We developed our arguments based on what we know about destructive feedback, and we concluded from the literature on sensitivity to information regarding the self that more subtle ways of communicating offending feedback would likely exist. From there on, we had to rely on our own judgment. Our results (and those of the two pretests) indicate to us that we were not too far off. Still, much more work is needed to establish the concept of subtly offending feedback theoretically, as well as in terms of operationalization and in terms of its boundary conditions (e.g., culture). All we can claim is that our approach yielded results that are promising enough to justify further investigations and theory development on the concept of subtly offending feedback.

Acknowledgments

We thank our students for their help in collecting and analyzing the data.

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Appendix

Feedback conditions: theory

Feedback condition	Text
Optimal feedback	<p>Theory should only contain facts and theories. This means linking different theories. You should clearly distinguish between: (1) What is the main statement of the different theories? (2) What can be verified by empirical studies? (3) What is your opinion of these theories?</p> <p>You did this in a good way although you presented some interpretations without directly saying that they were interpretations. Your considerations made sense, and you should stick to them. I would suggest that you use these interpretations as a summarizing valuation and that you make clear that these are your personal thoughts.</p>
Overkill	<p>Theory should only contain facts and theories. You should clearly distinguish between: (1) What is the main statement of the different theories? (2) What can be verified by empirical studies? (3) What is your opinion of these theories?</p> <p>You did this in a good way although you presented some interpretations without directly saying that they were interpretations. If you mix theory and interpretation, the reader often does not know whether it is an interpretation, a personal statement of the author, accepted psychological knowledge, or something else. The reader becomes confused by those statements, is rubbing his or her eyes because of his/her astonishment because the reader wants to distinguish between theory, your own statements, accepted knowledge and speculations. I suggest that you use these interpretations as a summarizing valuation and that you make clear that these are your personal thoughts.</p>
Banality	<p>Theory should only contain facts and theories. That means that you should link different theories. You should clearly distinguish between: (1) What is the main statement of the different theories? (2) What can be verified by empirical studies? (3) What is your opinion of these theories?</p> <p>You did this in a good way although you presented some interpretations without directly saying that they were interpretations. It would have been easy to solve the problem of distinguishing between theory and interpretation. I suggest that you use these interpretations as a summarizing valuation and that you make clear that these are your personal thoughts.</p>
Exaggeration	<p>Theory should only contain facts and theories. That means that you should link different theories. You should clearly distinguish between: (1) What is the main statement of the different theories? (2) What can be verified by empirical studies? (3) What is your opinion of these theories?</p> <p>Although you did this in a good way, I was really surprised that you included some interpretations. Therefore, you contravened one of the basic rules of empirical work. I suggest that you use these interpretations as a summarizing valuation and that you make clear that these are your personal thoughts.</p>
Destructive negative feedback	<p>Theory should only contain facts and theories. That means that you should link different theories. You should clearly distinguish between: (1) What is the main statement of the different theories? (2) What can be verified by empirical studies? (3) What is your opinion of these theories?</p> <p>Unfortunately, you did not understand the difference between illustrating theory and your personal interpretation. I suggest that you use these interpretations as a summarizing valuation and that you make clear that these are your personal thoughts.</p>