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'Catch me if you can?': A Psychological Analysis of Managers Feedback Seeking

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Header: Inquiry Based Feedback Seeking in a Contingent Domain

Key Words: Feedback Seeking, Inquiry, Self-Efficacy, Self-Enhancement, Self-Protection, Appraisal, Psychological Safety

‘Catch me if you can?’: A Psychological Analysis of Managers Feedback Seeking

Aim: This paper locates managerial feedback-seeking in a self-regulation model in which self-motivational considerations are uppermost. It uses a qualitative psychological approach to address the question of when, what, how, from whom and why is feedback sought in a performance contingent managerial setting.

Method: Using Kelly’s (1955) Repertory Grid technique, 10 managers’ reflected systematically on their feedback seeking in an organizational context. A Grounded Theory framework was used to identify higher-order cross-case constructs.

Findings: Managers sought performance feedback when they perceived uncertainty and difficulty in the pursuit of their managerial functions and were minded of their need to develop their management skills. Consistent with the instrumental model, feedback seeking was highly goal-oriented and self-affirmative in pursuit of increased managerial competence. However, the finding that adds most to our understanding on both an empirical and theoretical level is in showing how managers’ sought their feedback *remotely*, and from largely external sources, to reconcile development needs with self-protective considerations (i.e., image and ego-costs) in relation to subordinates and peers. These findings have implications for understanding feedback seeking as a multi-dimensional highly self-motivated process.

Limitations: Qualitative research uses small samples and this limits their empirical generalizability; however, our findings link with previous work indicating potential for hypothesis generation and theoretical development.

Implications: Questions are raised about whether managers feel able to seek performance feedback for learning and development purposes, without feeling threatened in their capability and worth as managers. We argue that the environment most conducive to feedback seeking is one in which manager’s feel ‘psychologically safe’ rather than defensive about their capability (Edmonson, 2004).

Although feedback is pivotal to independent social existence and identity (Rosenblueth, Weiner & Bigelow, 1943), it remains a highly complex and sensitive matter in organizational contexts (Kluger & Nisi, 1996). Broadly understood, feedback is a determinative and directive process whereby output (through action), is then fed back (via the responses of 'the acted upon', whether artefacts or people), as diagnostic (i.e., corrective) input. In this way, feedback is not only crucial to the normative alignment of the individual with performance expectations (especially in novel and/or uncertain situations) but can also be actively sought for self-evaluation (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Nicol & Mcfarlane-Dick, 2006). Feedback can be sought by inquiry (direct request for feedback) and/or monitoring (by more subtle observation of role-models and self-monitoring strategies) (Ashford, 1986). Here we focus in particular on *non-mandatory feedback* that is actively sought (i.e., through inquiry) by managers in relation to their managerial tasks. Building on Ashford, Blatt and Vandewalle (2003) we investigated when, what, how, from whom and why is feedback sought in a performance contingent managerial setting. To this end, our paper commences with a discussion of the literature on feedback seeking with particular consideration of theoretical approaches underpinning the domain, and then presents the discussion of data gathered through a qualitative approach in order to promote a process-driven perspective.

Feedback Seeking in Organizational Contexts

We harness the definition of *feedback seeking* offered by Ashford (1986, p.466) as "…[a] conscious devotion of effort toward determining the correctness and adequacy of behaviours for attaining valued end states".

Defined in this way, feedback seeking is a complex goal-oriented process. This process can be understood in part using a cost-benefit model mediated by a variety of self-motives (Ashford, Blatt & VandeWalle, 2003). In the words of Ashford and Cummings (1983, p.779) feedback is not like any other information, "it is information about the self, it is emotionally charged" (see also, Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). In fact, "seeking feedback is essentially a self-evaluation process' (Ansell, Lievens & Levy, 2007;

p.212)**.** Thus, far from being a purely instrumental self-assessment activity, there are many other issues at stake including image (i.e., self-presentation) and other ego-sensitive (i.e., self-protective) considerations.

To date however, research on feedback seeking has mostly focused on lower level employees, and instrumental motives, and hence relatively little is known about the dynamics of feedback seeking in highly image conscious, ego exposing managerial contexts (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). As Ashford et al (2003) note, the more senior the position, the greater the expectations of competence across a range of highly challenging interpersonal and social tasks that they may feel less equipped to handle with certainty. On an instrumental level, this is a situation in which, in principle, feedback seeking by inquiry should increase as part of an instrumental (i.e., uncertainty reduction) self-assessment effort. On the other hand, a manager risks potential embarrassment of drawing attention to their uncertainties and insecurities (Atwater, Waldman, Atwater & Cartier, 2000; Ashford, 1986). Ashford and Cummings (1983) found that when performers perceive that seeking feedback would somehow make them 'look bad' and/or when others' expected them to display competence and confidence, their likelihood of feedback seeking by inquiry declined. In such contexts, image and ego costs are likely to "interact to make honest feedback seeking unlikely" (Ashford et al, 2003; p.789).

Image and ego costs are especially likely to be salient in 'feedback environments' (Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978) that [implicitly if not explicitly] value performance over learning (e.g., Northcraft & Ashford, 1990). Context can influence the meaning of feedback by inquiry, and in particular whether the act of feedback seeking is seen as a strength or insecurity, and as such is crucial to whether feedback is sought or not and from whom (Ashford et al, 2003; Brown, Farnham & Cook, 2002). Notwithstanding the role played by individual differences in feedback seeking (VandeWalle, 2003), the current study aims to understand feedback seeking in a context in which goal orientations and motives can vary in salience.

The role of self and identity in the feedback seeking process

In general, people are inclined to seek feedback that is favourable to self and to avoid negative feedback (Ansell, Lievens and Levy, 2007**;** Morrison & Cummings, 1992). As Schrauger's (1975) Self-Enhancement Theory would postulate, individuals mostly (unless they are clinically depressed) seek feedback to self-validate (Casbon, Burns, Bradbury, & Joiner, 2005). Indeed, it is difficult to find a theory of identity that does not assume a motivation to secure and maintain (i.e., protect) positive self-esteem (Tajfel, 1978). Self-esteem can pertain to the whole self (i.e., global self-esteem which may have trait-like qualities acquired from the accumulation of predominantly positive or negative experiences in early life) or specific components of identity (which denote 'who I am' in relation to particular roles and that have state-like malleable qualities), and represents a value from positive (high self-worth) to negative (low self-worth) (Branden, 2001; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). In the current context it is important to note that we use the term self-evaluation to refer to specific social state self-esteem in association with particular identities (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle & Otten, 2005; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) rather than global or trait self-esteem (Turner & Reynolds, 2001) which may be more chronically inclined to be high or low.

Consistent with self-enhancement theory, Morrison & Cummings (1992) found that the decision to actively seek feedback largely depended on the diagnosticity (i.e., corrective value) of the message in combination with self-expectations. That is, if the perceived prognosis of receiving evaluations was negative (i.e., self-negating), the opportunity to seek feedback would not be used. On the other hand, Morrison and Cummings (1992) found that new or inexperienced staff in organizational contexts accepted the risk of negative feedback if they considered it to have corrective benefit. Other research by Cummings and colleagues has likewise found that new and inexperienced employees generally seek more feedback than older, more experienced long-standing employees (Ashford & Cummings, 1985). The difference between experienced and inexperienced employees is that the former may experience threats to identity as

'competent' if they expose themselves to potentially invalidating negative feedback, whereas the latter may construe feedback as ultimately competence-enhancing (i.e., they have less to lose) (Breakwell, 1986; 1992).

Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986; 1992) elaborates that self-worth can be secured on both individual and inter-group levels, via the identity principles of distinctiveness, continuity and self-efficacy. Breakwell (1986; 1992) argues that positive distinctiveness relative to others, maintaining continuity of identity over time and also self-efficacy are crucial sources of reflected worth, particularly in an organizational context. It is interesting to note however that threats to individual self-esteem may be more potent than threats to self as a member of a group because this is a level at which it is more difficult to find alternative identities (e.g., Gaertner & Sedikides, 2005).

In a work context, self-efficacy is especially likely to be a key identity consideration (Breakwell, 1992) in the feedback scenario. Self efficacy is a key element in Bandura's (1997) social cognitive/ learning theory (see also Gist & Mitchell, 1992), defined by Bandura (1997, p.3) as the "belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments". The higher one's self efficacy, the more likely one is to engage and persist in task-related behavior (Chen & Bliese, 2002). Self-efficacy depends fundamentally on feedback from 'success' (i.e., positive) experiences, but negative feedback might also inform efficacy beliefs by highlighting knowledge and skill in which improvement or development is required. However, the self-affirming nature of identity processes pose a dilemma for feedback delivery that has 'negative', potentially self-undermining implications. Selective-defensive aspects of workings of identity are self-maintaining when negative self-appraisals are *inappropriately* undermining or disabling, but could be problematic for constructive self-regulated change (Atwater et al., 2000; Bailey & Austin, 2006; De Nisi & Kluger, 2000; Fletcher, 2004; Fletcher & Baldry, 2000; Heslin & Latham, 2004; Kluger & De Nisi, 1996; Maurer, Mitchelet, & Barbeite, 2002).

Clearly, feedback that is not otherwise overtly self-affirming is hard to both receive and deliver. Feed-forward principles of delivery have been proposed that build on the principle of self-affirmation, and

this area of practise has promise for how to help take the potential sting out of negative feedback (Kluger & Nir, 2006), playing to the desire to manage a positive identity on others (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Morrison & Bies, 1991). This is important because the long-standing image of the effective manager rests heavily on an assumption that active feedback-seeking is integral to the way they manage their own performance (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1994), and to this extent the distinction between learning and performance goal orientations are highly pertinent (Tuckey, Brewer, & Williamson, 2002; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997; VandeWalle, 2003).

Performance goal orientation describes a motivation to demonstrate and validate the adequacy of one's competence by seeking favourable judgements and avoiding negative judgements about competence. When predominantly performance goal oriented, feedback is likely to be actively sought but defensively received if it is not self-affirming. By contrast, a learning goal orientation describes a motivation to develop competence by acquiring new skills and mastering new situations, and as such is more likely to be associated with a constructive approach to feedback seeking and receipt (see VandeWalle, 2003 for a review of relevant supportive evidence). These orientations are described as having both trait (i.e., stable personality inclinations) and state (i.e., variable across situations) elements, depending on the relative cultural salience of performance or learning respectively. That is, goal orientation can be modified by strong situational cues about evaluation standards – whether outcome (i.e., preoccupied with performance) or process-based (i.e., encouraging learning, including tolerance of mistakes) respectively (Ames, 1992). Given that work organizations are predominantly performance cultures, the image and ego costs of revealing insecurity may prohibit genuine efforts to learn from feedback seeking inquiry (Edmonson, 2004).

Methods in feedback seeking research

The use of quantitative methods predominates in managerial research and in feedback seeking research in particular with some obvious advantages but also, from our point of view some major

limitations (Hamlin, 2004). Qualitative work is especially well suited to understanding processes (Alveson, 2002; Cassell, Close, Duberly & Johnson, 2000; Cassell & Symn, 1994; Parry, 1998). Our choice of Repertory Grid Technique (Kelly, 1955) is consistent with other work that has successfully used it for studies of managers and in work psychology generally. For example, the repertory grid technique has been used to evaluate management training (Easterby-Smith & Ashton, 1975), managers' self-development (Fransella & Porter 1990), management behaviors (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Holman 1996), to facilitate organizational change and development (Cassell et al., 2000) and to identify corporate values (Brophy, 2003). Easterby-Smith et al., (1996: 4) succinctly describe the usefulness of repertory grids in studies of managerial behaviors:

> "*When faced with questions about effective managerial and leadership behaviors, many managers respond with answers about what they think they should know rather than what they actually think. Repertory grids attempt to delve deeper and uncover 'managers' theories in use. While difficult, the process can be rewarding, with new and interesting insights being gained for both parties [researcher and managers]".*

The repertory grid method (RGM) is derived from Kelly's (1955) theory of personal construct psychology (PCP). Underlying the PCP is the idea that the individual is an enquiring person (Fransella, Bell, & Bannister 2004) trying to make sense of, or give meaning to, the situations encountered. To achieve this, individuals create and recreate an implicit theoretical framework or 'personal construct system' consisting of a complex system of constructs that represent deep levels of psychological understanding that can be mapped out using the RGM (Easterby-Smith et al. (1996: 3; see also, Gammack & Stephens, 1994). The RGM offers a structure in which the inquiry can proceed in the participant's own terms, aided by the skilled facilitation of an interviewer. With the researcher's assistance, the participant is also able to understand the meanings reflected in the grid, emphasizing participation and fostering a sense of inclusion in the production of knowledge. The fact that the structure is not imposed on the subject, but represents

the subject's own construction, makes the data more credible since it reflects an authentic representation of individual sense-making.

In summary, the current research sought to understand more about the lived experience of non-mandatory feedback seeking among managers in organizational contexts using a qualitative and there-fore process-orientated approach. It was of particular interest to investigate when feedback seeking is most likely and from whom in the context of managerial working. How, in particular, does the need for self-improvement interact with the need to protect the ego and present a competent image, in a highly contingent managerial domain? (Ashford et al, 2003: 791).

Method and Analytic Strategy

The three essential features of a repertory grid (RG) are Elements, Constructs and the Linking mechanisms (Brewerton & Millward, 2001). The Elements are the designated focus of an individual's thoughts to which they relate their values or concepts. These can be people, ideas, places or inanimate things (Thomas & Hari-Augstein, 1985). Here the Elements were 'critical incidents' (Flanagan, 1954) or concrete situations in which a manager said they were more or less likely to actively seek feedback by inquiry from others. Constructs, on the other hand, are the 'qualities' which a person uses to describe and differentiate between the elements. The constructs are viewed as bi-polar in that they have both positive and negative ends. Linking mechanisms are the various ways in which how elements and constructs are linked, and are the primary focus of analysis. Another important feature of the RG methodology is the stages involved in its practical application. Although there are variations to repertory techniques, they all contain three basic stages (Gammack & Stephens, 1994): element elicitation, construct elicitation and the construction of a matrix of elements against constructs. The PCP and the RG methodology traditionally emphasize the role of constructs, and elements are used as a way of evaluating constructs (Bell, 1997). A fourth stage could be added, where the researcher considers which analytic route to take- qualitative or quantitative, or both.

Quantitative means of RG analysis include cluster analysis, spatial/principal component analysis and multidimensional scaling all of which may offer useful insights[1] into domain relationships and underlying construct structures. However, such statistical applications have been criticized as being inconsistent with Kelly's original Personal Construct Philosophy (e.g., Fromm, 2004), which puts the accent on conversation, language and in-depth interview which are all important considerations in the analytic process (Bell, 1997; Easterby-Smith et al., 1996; Gammack & Stephen, 1994). Several qualitative approaches are available to researchers wishing to examine people's accounts of particular phenomenon (Bannister & Fransella, 2003; Henwood, 1996; Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003), but for current purposes a Grounded Theory stance was adopted (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Henwood & Pidgeon 1992) as recommended by Cassell, Close, Duberly and Johnson (2000; see also Charmaz, 2006), although first a manual approach to quantification was applied to identify the relative importance of lower order constructs as feeder into the higher order more qualitative analysis. In this analytic approach the 'conceptual' understanding derived from the analysis maintains its grounding in the data rather than from pre-existing theoretical concerns (Henwood & Pidgeon 1992). The Grounded Theory approach involves systematic and sequential analysis of data through three main processes. The basic elements of the processes are: generation and development of concepts from the data, categorization of the concepts that are related to the same phenomenon, and integration of the categories that is relating all the concepts to build a coherent theoretical framework and a proposition that underlies and explains the phenomenon under investigation (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

[1] There are a variety of grid analysis packages available for this, for example WebGrid III, RepGrid and WinGrid. In the current study, WebGrid III was used to conduct Principal Components Analysis. A comparable higher order structure was produced to that of qualitative analysis; no additional descriptive insights were yielded.

Sample and Interview Strategy

Two interviews were conducted with each of ten managers (seven males and three females) purposively selected through personal contacts from across both private and public organizations in South East England, UK. Inclusion criteria were that:-

- no more than one manager had a position in any particular organization to ensure that a range of feedback settings were represented,
- the sample of managers comprised both male and female,
- managers had a tenure of at least one year in a senior management position,
- managers had been employees of the same organization for at least one year.

These criteria were selected to ensure that managers had all had experience of senior level management (with more responsibility for complex people management scenarios) and within their current organization such that there had been some stability in their feedback environment on which to reflect. We also wanted to sample managers rather than organizations per se, and include both males and females to minimize the potential of eventual findings being sex-specific.

The first interview session which involved using the repertory grid technique lasted between 90-120 minutes, whilst the second interview session on sources of feedback lasted 15-20 minutes. Each was conducted in the participants' workplaces in a private setting, either during lunch–breaks or after close of work. Ethical consideration included the researcher offering assurance of confidentiality to participants and asking for permission to tape-record the session so that interviews could be transcribed. The researcher explained the repertory grid technique and encouraged participants to be candid in their answers in discussing feedback seeking about their performance.

Interview Procedure and Manual Analysis

There were two phase to the interview: phase one was the grid interview comprising three stages, and phase two was a feeding-back session on the synthesized findings to check the authenticity of our interpretation in manager's eyes, and a brief interview about source of feedback seeking. There was a period of two weeks between the first and the second phases of the interviewing.

Phase 1 The Grid Interview

The first was the generation of elements for the grid. During the initial stages of the interview, respondents were asked questions about their managerial functions and the extent to which they will ask for feedback (i.e., make active inquiries) about their performance on such functions. They were required to identify three tangible, that is, clearly defined functions in their managerial domain on which they seek or tend to seek feedback about their performance through active inquiry. They were also asked to think of three functions where they do not or would not need to seek feedback, and three functions where sometimes they do and sometimes do not actively seek feedback about their performance. Interviewees gave reasons for seeking or not seeking or sometimes seeking feedback about their performance on such functions respectively. Each element was listed on a card and labeled from 1 to 9 for each participant. For example, case number 5 generated the following managerial functions as elements: client interaction, team interaction, case management, team formation/playing, supervision, forward planning, time keeping, policies/ procedures. In all, ten participants provided 90 managerial functions in repertory grid interviews (see Table 1 for the list of elements and constructs).

Insert Table 1 about here

The second stage is the elicitation of constructs, concerned with formulating and making distinctions that can be applied amongst these elements using the method of 'triading' (Easterby-Smith et al., 1996; Fromm, 2004). That is, participants were presented with three elements (a triad) at a time and

asked to consider how two were similar but different or opposite to the third, and to explain why (with respect of the functions and inquiry-based feedback seeking tendencies). Through probing, prompting, and clarification during the conversational interview, interviewees were encouraged to describe the similarity or differences between the pair and the single using a word or a phrase. Probing questions were carefully chosen to avoid any kind of leading on content. All participants required less probing throughout the course of the interview as they became more familiar and comfortable with the comparison process. This word or phrase is then used to describe their 'constructs.' The triads were presented in varying combinations 18 times to each interviewee. Thus each participant comfortably generated a set of 18 constructs. This process of comparing and contrasting generated plentiful data and allowed the researcher the opportunity at a later stage to make individual case-specific comparison of constructs. The word or phrase that described the 'pair' in the triad was written on the 'left pole' whilst the opposite which described the 'single' was written on the right pole on the grid. The bi-polar constructs produced were charted on the grid until it was complete. Any comments the interviewee made during the elicitation process were tape recorded, with their permission. In all, ten interviews generated a total of 180 constructs.

The third stage involved the construction of a grid by helping interviewees make systematic links between the constructs and the elements. Interviewees were asked to assess the relatedness of each construct with each element on a 5- point Likert scale anchored by the poles of each construct, with one indicating the least related and five indicating the most related. For each participant, the intersection of the 18 construct rows with 9 element columns formed the grid and the matrix of 162 specific ratings it contains is amenable to manual or computer analysis.

To enable the researcher to score and analyze the grids using the prototype manual method (Brewerton & Millward, 2001) and identify the most important constructs (lower order constructs) for each participant's feedback seeking behavior, they were further asked to give an overarching score of the elements on their grid using the same scale of 1 to 5 on the extent to which they would seek feedback on each element (managerial function) thus, 5 = more likely to seek, to 1 = less likely to seek. This

overarching rating was used to score participants' grid ratings by comparing them to their grid ratings to find consistencies and inconsistencies in their grid ratings. The greater the difference in scores between one end of the pole and the other, the more differentiating the construct. Up to eight of the most differentiating constructs were selected for each case and entered into higher order analysis (see Table 1). For example, the constructs that most differentiated inquiry based feedback seeking situations from those in which in was less likely were 'uncertainties', 'dynamic function', 'complex', 'difficult', 'crucial to organisational goals', and 'others' views matter'.

At the end of the session, participants were asked to give evaluative feedback on the process. All found the RG process to be a 'hard thinking exercise'. The iterative comparison process is labor intensive, and participants may take a while to become accustomed to it, but all found it easier over the course of the interview. Moreover, all consistently agreed that it was intellectually challenging and fascinating, enabling them to reflect systematically on their inquiry-based feedback seeking propensity in a way they had never done before, and deriving some important self-insights. This is an important point, because on a practical level, participants may not initially understand what they are doing and why, and need to be persuaded (should they become cynical about the value of the grid exercise) that their time and effort is worth it. In our experience, the grid exercise is always worth it for participants, but they may not genuinely appreciate this until they 'see' what it generates in terms of self-insight (Brewerton & Millward, 2001). From a research perspective, the psychological insights yielded from intensive grid work might not otherwise be easily articulated in a regular self-report interview (Cassell, Close, Duberly, & Johnson, 2000).

Phase 2 Feeding back and Source of Feedback Seeking

This phase of the interview lasted 15-20 minutes and involved presenting back the findings in synthesized form and then inviting managers to engage in a brief discussion about sources of feedback. Managers were asked to reflect on who they would consult across the particular situations in their grid, why and on what basis they would also exclude particular sources of feedback from their feedback seeking activity.

Grounded Theory Analysis

The manual analysis identified those constructs that the individual considered most significant in relation to each element (Table 1). These, along with verbatim comments arising during the interview process, ere then analyzed and clustered using the constant comparative process to form themes (Charmaz, 2006; Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Charmaz (2006: 187) describes constant comparative as: "a method of analysis that generate successively more abstract concepts and theories through inductive processes of comparing data with data, category with category and category with concept". In the early stages of the analysis, maximum flexibility was exercised in generating new categories from the data. Also, it was ensured that the descriptions of the categories befitted the textual data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992). In practical terms, three steps were involved in the constant comparative process: step one, involved open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) or substantive coding (Glasser, 1992) to develop concepts, categories and properties at a lower order construct level. Step two involved axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998) to identify and develop connections between categories and sub-categories to generate higher order constructs. Following Cassell et al., (2000), a construct which could fit into more than one category was dual categorized. This enabled us to refine them into major categories or axial codes or higher order constructs which reflect the propositions that have been induced through the systematic examination and interrogation of the data. The analysis of the lower order constructs identified three higher order constructs as underlying participants' performance feedback seeking process, as detailed below. Step three, involved selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) or theoretical coding (Glaser, 1992) to integrate categories and build core categories or core constructs and a theoretical framework. This stage was a further higher order psychological analysis often described as meta-interpretation of the higher order constructs. This involved further refinement of the higher order constructs into a single concept, and a theoretical framework considered underlying performance feedback seeking behavior. This involved the identification or generation of, the core

category or concept which relates to all the other higher order constructs and presents and explains the ideas that have been presented as significant by participants as underlying the phenomenon under investigation, i.e., their feedback seeking propensity. According to the grounded theory approach this core category or concept is the theoretical construct underwriting the findings, that is, it potentially explains participants' feedback seeking propensities in an organizational setting.

Aggregating participant responses into themes with the aim of suggesting shared meanings calls into question the epistemological position of the research. Cassell et al. (2000) however argued that aggregating common constructs is not necessarily a deviation from Kelly's constructivist 'individual' approach in that the main focus remains on how the participants construct and make sense of their world. A key advantage of the grid is the presentation of individual constructs, yet in order to provide clarity from large amounts of data, the researcher will inevitably want to claim some patterns in the analytic process. Thomas and Harri- Augustein (1985) have criticized the process by which the description of meaning from a grid is achieved as tending to be reductionist, with constructs categorized together in convenient ways to make a whole. While this criticism may be offset by reference to the underlying epistemological basis of the technique, awareness of this issue is important for the researcher analyzing repertory grids.

In addition to aggregating responses from the repertory grid into themes, the findings are presented with quotes from participants detailing their individual feedback seeking experiences. All participants are represented by at least one quote to ensure adequate representation: quotes are used as exemplars of a theme or sub-theme, as well as having an illustrative function. The findings of this study therefore benefit from the scores derived from the repertory grid and the support of textual quotes from their interviews**.** Interview material from the discussion about feedback sources was handled in the same way.

Findings

Findings are presented under two headings: 1) what situations promote feedback seeking and why? 2) sources of feedback seeking i.e., from whom is feedback sought and why?

What situations promote feedback seeking and why?

The analysis of the repertory grid data produced three main higher order categories that arguably underwrite participants' performance feedback seeking behaviors: i) perceived uncertainties; ii) perceived difficulties; and ii) self/skill development, these are used to structure our discussion below. That is, managers said they were more likely to seek performance feedback when they perceived uncertainties and difficulties in fulfilling their functions and needed to develop their skills in order to improve their performance to achieve organizational goals.

Perceived Uncertainties

> *"It is an ambiguous task….. There are no clear objectives or guidelines. It needs a lot of discretion. You can never be sure of what you are doing"*

'Perceived uncertainties' pertain to situations in which managers felt unsure about whether they had the appropriate knowledge and skills, or knew the right approach to take to a task.

> *"I will seek feedback on these roles because they don't have clear objectives [counselling & motivation] which make it difficult to assess so you will seek feedback.….Because there are no clear cut objectives, guidelines and criteria for even going about it"…*

Conversely managers said that they would be less likely to seek feedback when they are certain about what to do and how to do it.

> *"I will not need feedback to know whether or not the workers are motivated. I can see for myself immediately whether it is working or not…You can see immediate change in their disposition as to whether it has been effective or not. Result is obvious".*

Four subcategories of uncertainty were evident: cognitive (right decision/judgment), managerial functions (what I am doing), managerial delivery (how I am doing it) and consequences or outcomes. Managers were likely to seek feedback when uncertainties arose in the cognitive domain (i.e., personal knowledge, perception, understanding and decision making) because of the interpretative nature of the domain, and where making the right decision and judgment is fundamental. For example,

> *"I want to seek feedback on client interaction and supervision of support…in these functions I am dealing with people and individuals and my perception of their understanding may be different from what others may see. So I would want to verify my perception, verify my assessment with other professionals or colleagues for their assessments as well for confirmation of my views".*

> *"Team playing function … I might think I would be doing very well, but others might perceive it as not good enough"*

Managers were conversely less likely to seek feedback when they are certain and confident in the knowledge required for their functions, understand them, and are certain about their judgments and decisions. For example,

> *"For documentation…technically, I have come to a point where even I educate people on documentation. I do not need feedback now, at this point in my career. I have got to a level where my need for feedback compared to ten years ago is less…now I understand it"*

> *"I don't require feedback on my forward planning strategies because over the years, I have got the experience in planning ahead. I have got to a level where I can do it without feedback".*

Managers were more likely to seek feedback when they were not certain about whether *what* they were doing is right. For example,

> *"By supervising employees, you guide them where to go and when they go in that direction, you reward them for their performance….. I want to seek feedback because I want to see if I am being fair to them"*

> *"based on the resources you have on that particular day, you do duty delegation; you delegate duties; but it might not work out as you expect….you are changing or moving people from place to place so… I am not certain of their performance and out put…. If I have made the right delegation of duty".*

Likewise, managers were more likely to seek feedback about their performance when they are not certain about *how* they are delivering their functions. For example,

> *"I will need feedback to know how I am delivering my functions; how I am performing, regarding the methods I use in staff performance management."*

Managers are also more likely to seek feedback as a result of uncertainties of the outcomes of their functions. For example,

> *"Every organization needs to train and develop its people but you want to know to what extent you are spending. Is your entire budget going into training? So my feedback in this situation, I want to know whether we are recruiting well, whether we are recruiting the right people. My focus here is the outcome of the functions".*

They were less likely to seek feedback about their performance when they are certain and confident about the solutions and outcomes of their functions. For example,

> *"I would be unlikely to seek feedback; I would be confident in the solutions. I would not want to invite feedback to interfere with the execution of the work… I don't think feedback will improve the outcome".*

Perceived Difficulties

> *"Appraisals and assessments require curiosity and creative ideas, and you need to see the uniqueness of the situation for novel solutions."*

Managers were more likely to seek feedback about their performance when they perceived difficulties in their functions. Managerial work situations where difficulties were perceived include where the function is complex (i.e., when it involves various processes and requires many skills, but is less procedural, without fixed criteria for execution) and/or exploratory, in that the outcomes are not obvious. Such functions require understanding of the complexities involved, the use of crucial information, new ideas and others' opinions, and experiences for execution. The core proposition here is that managers perceived the need for others' opinions, new ideas and experiences in order to perform well despite the difficulty, to enhance their self-perceived and actual capability. Sub-categories of difficulty were: complex functions; dynamic

and novel functions; judgment and decision making functions; functions which require new ideas and experiences; and crucial functions.

A complex function was one perceived as having no obvious outcome, requiring multiple skills and involving considerable judgment and decision making, requiring experience as well as technical ability and with potential implications for career advancement. For example,

> *"These are both straightforward tasks that do not need feedback. But this is a qualitative task which you don't have fixed criteria. It is a complex task which needs feedback. This requires feedback; it is exploratory; whiles positive reporting (task) is concrete; it is black and white it does not require feedback. The outcome is obvious"*

> *"When you are coaching staff, first of all, you need more experience than the people you are going to help. If the people are dissatisfied with the organization, they want to leave. If they have not got enough support from you. It is a big responsibility. It is more difficult. In my company you have to be in higher hierarchy to be able to do the job. People have to trust you and believe in you that you can do it. It is difficult. I will definitely seek feedback on it".*

Managers also perceive functions as difficult when they require creativity. Such functions are perceived as novel as well as dynamic as opposed to routinised, mundane and stale. For example,

> *"Appraisals and assessments require curiosity and creative ideas, and you need to see the uniqueness of the situation for novel solutions whereas performance indicators are concrete. This is regular routine, so you don't need feedback it is not skilled based, it is bureaucratic".*

> *"I don't want feedback on these (tasks); they are mundane. Whereas these tasks (complaints) are exotic, I would want feedback, I think. By exotic, I mean every complaint is different, it involves different combinations of stuff, in what situations they are, what issues*

involved…. Every day you are on duty will be different, every assessment will be different. It involves different experiences. Performance indicators are always the same. It is routine. It is stale. Feedback is not needed".

Functions which require decision making are perceived as difficult. Such functions are experiential and require clear understanding. For example,

"These are judgmental and qualitative (duty senior and supervision). I am going to judge all the time, and make decisions. I will need feedback, on my assessment of clients, on my duty senior role. That is non- judgmental and objective. I will not need feedback".

Functions are perceived as being difficult when they require others' knowledge, ideas and experiences in order to perform them. For example,

"It is an area where I would value, the sort of people I would be talking to I would value their ideas as adding to, and in supplementing my own knowledge with the knowledge of other people. Creativity is such a big black box so no matter how competent I am, and the particular ideas .Feedback will refine and potentially improve the outcome".

Such functions may involve the making and implementation of important decisions which could be crucial for the success or otherwise of the organization. Conversely, they are less likely to seek feedback on functions which are considered less important to achieving organizational goals. For example,

"They are the core aspects of managerial functions because they involve developing your people…. Staffing is very critical for the success of the organisation. The performance of employees depends on the training they have had. These are crucial functions. I would seek feedback on them".

"It is the outcome of a decision that you are implementing. It is a solution to specific problem. You are dealing with the implementation of important decisions".

Self /Skill Development

"This is an area you can develop your skills with feedback from your clients, colleagues and superiors. For complaints, I will seek feedback because you develop your skills as you deal with them".

Managers said they are more likely to seek feedback that will help them to develop their skills and enhance their capability for performance improvement. They are less likely to seek feedback if they perceive that they are well equipped for their jobs, and/or where they are minded that it will not progress them in any way.

"This is an area you can develop your skills with feedback from your clients, colleagues and superiors…Zoning clients and ordering stock are both practical activities, - I will not need feedback. I would want feedback on appraisals and supervision because I need to develop my skills and constantly be aware of the need to develop my skills. Assessment of clients, I will less seek feedback on it because I am highly skilled in that".

"For time sheets, certain information has to be sent to the pay roll, and that is all. The one I will need feedback is appraisals. The feedback from this [time sheet] is not going to affect me, in my functions; it is going to affect other peoples pay. The only feedback I get is when one is not paid correctly, and I will check the time books. It is not going to affect me in any way. With appraisals, however, the information I get from it will show how I am doing in terms of management; this covers a wide range of functions. This task [appraisals] has to with my own development. The other one is not going to affect me in any way".

Managers were in particular, more likely to seek feedback for knowledge and experiences that will help them to develop their understanding of certain management functions. For example,

> *"it is performance improvement I will be looking for from feedback. Making sure that what I am doing works and secondly, getting further information of knowledge and opinion which will improve my performance in the future".*

Managers are more likely to seek feedback when they perceive that it will enable them to develop their skills,

> *"My ability to communicate, my ability to lead, will be assessed. For this function [discipline], it is the employee who will be or being assessed. So for me, I will need the feedback for my personal assessment and development. On the other hand this function is not related to my personal development. I will not need feedback on it"*

Feedback Sources

A feedback source is a crucial factor impacting on managers likelihood of feedback seeking, particularly, source expertise. Managers said that there would only seek feedback from a reputable source, where they think they would get useful and impartial information, ideas, opinion, knowledge, skills and expertise to enhance their capability for performance improvement. For example,

> *"I would not particularly think about getting feedback, because I think it is outside the interest and expertise of the people I am working with. It is unlikely that the clients or colleagues or suppliers would be able to offer me any thing useful in determining strategic decisions. Should I see a mentor, or a counselor? I don't think any one else could add any thing useful to my judgments".*

> *"I would be looking for other peoples' contributions as to how they can influence the job in hand (management of client relationships and creative ideas). …I don't think colleagues and other people at work will be able to offer any useful information.*

> *"I would probably get it from people outside my working environment- more likely to be friends…It depends on the nature of the feedback and the management areas you are seeking feedback about".*

Managers categorically said that they would NOT seek feedback from their subordinates or immediate colleagues/peers. One manager was especially vociferous on this matter, openly declaring that he would NOT seek feedback if it risked encouraging unhelpful criticism, if it risked encouraging resistance to his proposals, ideas and, plans and more importantly, or if it risked undermining his authority because of the implication that he was not sure of what he was doing.

> *I would not risk seeking feedback if I knew it would undermine my authority. If I seek feedback about my performance, the implication is that I am not sure of what I am doing.*

Although other managers did not articulate their sentiments in quite such an explicit way, all were clearly minded that they risked their competence and credibility being undermined if they were to seek feedback from local sources.

Summary and Discussion

We found that managers were more likely to seek feedback about their performance when they perceived uncertainties and difficulties in relation to complex interpersonal and social functions, and when they were motivated to develop their skills for performance improvement. On this level, the findings are consistent with the 'instrumental' model of feedback seeking as a means of making sense of what to do and how, especially in new uncertain situations where there is no one right answer (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford et al, 2003; Berlyne, 1960; Tuckey, Brewer & Williamson, 2002), Managerial work has long been acknowledged to be inherently complex and ambiguous (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Mintzberg, 1975) which makes it difficult to specify precisely what managers should do at any point in time (Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Indeed, the infinite complexity and ambiguity of the non-technical aspects of the managerial role was explicitly and consistently noted by participants in the current study. All instances of feedback seeking, whether prompted by uncertainty, difficulty or the self-appraised need for skill development, were however underwritten by an explicit goal of improving managerial capability in relation to organizational goals. Thus, we found that even our experienced managers actively sought feedback when they felt insecure about their competence or using Breakwell's (1986) terms, experienced threat to their sense of efficacy as managers (Breakwell, 1992).

Bandura (1997, p.3) defined self-efficacy as the 'belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments.' The higher one's self efficacy, the more likely one is to engage and persist in task related behavior (Chen & Bliese, 2002). Self efficacy positively predicts job attitudes (Saks, 1995), job performance (Locke, 1991; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998), and managerial work performance (Robertson & Sadri, 1993). Maurer et al (2002) also note that a high overall efficacy is required to seek and act on feedback. In short, we found that managers who were highly identified with their role and committed to achieving organizational goals, sought feedback in a self-regulatory manner (Carver, 2004) to improve their efficacy particularly across specific domains in which

they perceived they had a capability deficit or where their capability could not be directly or immediately ascertained.

However, this conclusion must be moderated by the important finding that feedback was only sought from credible, remote sources, largely outside the organization, to minimize the risk of being invalidated as competent managers. Our managers faced what VandeWalle (2003: 599) describe as "a self-control dilemma between the need for accurate self-assessment and the need for self-enhancement". To reconcile these conflicting motives, our managers were highly selective about where they directed their inquiry, by consulting remotely (Ansell et al, 2007). Vancouver & Morrison (1995) found likewise that the source of feedback is crucial to its usability. In short, managers sought feedback but only to the extent that they felt that the benefits of feedback seeking (to increase efficacy, and minimize actual incompetence) could be undertaken without jeopardizing their identity as 'competent managers' (i.e., self-efficacy) by exposing their weaknesses in the eyes of their subordinates and peers (Breakwell, 1993). Tsui and Ashford (1994) likewise found that managers were more likely to consult distal (i.e., remote) sources of feedback outside the organization for these reasons (see also Morrison & Bies, 1991; Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford et al, 2003).

Inhibitions to active feedback seeking from local more immediate sources may be created by a need to maintain and impress on subordinates, a competent manager identity. Others have likewise found some resistance among managers' to subordinate feedback (e.g., Nemeth, 1997), despite findings on the contrary, for a highly beneficial developmental impact of subordinate feedback on managers (e.g., Bailey & Austin, 2002; Brutus, London & Martineau, 1999). Our managers were all categorical in their choice NOT to consult subordinates on performance matters. This may be especially likely in performance-oriented cultures in which 'mistakes' are likely to be hidden, and performance difficulties are commonly glossed over or denied (Edmonson, 2004).

Together our findings suggest that the instrumental model of feedback seeking (as primarily motivated by uncertainty reduction) is a viable means for understanding managers when managers will make active inquiries about what to do and how. Managers sought to manage their self-efficacy in a self-

regulatory manner by consulting others on complex interpersonal and social matters in particular. On the other hand, their need for self-enhancement and verification was actively managed without incurring costs to both image (i.e., self-presentation as competent in the eyes of subordinates in particular) and ego (i.e., pre-empting risks of negative feedback from local sources), by consulting remotely from trusted sources.

These findings have empirical value insofar as they contribute to our understanding of how various self-motives interplay in the way managers make sense of, and engage with their feedback environment (Ansell et al, 2007). Most studies on feedback seeking focus on one particular dimension (e.g., feedback method, sign, outcome, source, etc.), but the current study indicates the value of looking at feedback as a multi-dimensional activity used proactively to achieve multiple outcomes. Thus, consulting a particular source of feedback can be strategically used to achieve simultaneous potentially conflicting motives for both self-improvement and self-protection especially in contingent domains that might otherwise risk exposing managers as incompetent.

The findings also have a theoretical value insofar as they confirm the need highlighted by Ansell et al (2007) to integrate feedback seeking research with research on self, with potential to add explanatory value. Taxonomic thinking around feedback seeking has been useful in describing the domain of interest, but it cannot explain when it is most likely, how and from whom or to what end point. VandeWalle's (2003) theoretical work on goal orientation as a moderator of how costs and benefits are weighed up in the feedback seeking process is an important step in the explanatory endeavor, but the current findings indicate a need to also consider the role played by situational considerations, as well as the strategies that individuals might use to reconcile different dimensions of feedback seeking to achieve multiple self-regulatory goals (e.g., Levy, Albright, Cawley, & Williams, 1995). Ansell et al's (2003) approach to feedback seeking integrates uncertainty reduction needs with self-enhancement needs, arguing that both individual differences and situational factors drive the balance between motives. However, we see the main contribution Ansell's approach being in recognition that the self-regulating individual can proactively manage their different motives, such that, for example, colleagues might be consulted for self-

verifying motives, supervisors for self-enhancement, and mentors for self-improvement (see also Trope & Neter, 1994).

From an organizational perspective, important questions can be raised about whether managers always feel able to seek performance feedback without feeling threatened in their capability as managers. The link between self-efficacy and performance feedback is not new (e.g., Tuckey, Brewer & Williamson, 2006) but relatively under-researched. It is a limitation of the current study that we did not assess individual differences in goal orientation but clearly our managers did seek to genuinely learn from the sources they did consult but nonetheless had 'performance concerns' that they were simultaneously motivated to address. Dweck (1999: 584) point out that "the problem with a performance goal orientation arises when a focus on validating ability becomes so important that it drives out learning goals". In the current study, this did not appear to be the case. However, it is nonetheless possible to envisage contexts in which this does happen (e.g., Edmonson, 2004). VandeWalle (2003) alert organisations to be minded of the kind of feedback environment they are creating, and to avoid in particular unwittingly creating performance preoccupations as the expense of learning by inducing competition, interpersonal comparison and intolerance of mistakes. Feedback systems he argues need to focus more on behaviour than comparison and development rather than evaluation. Edmonson (2004) argues that genuine learning from errors, mistakes and weaknesses can only take place in organizational contexts that are 'psychologically safe', i.e., characterised by mutual trust and support for development. The feedback literature has been criticised because it has tended to study feedback seeking largely in isolation from organizational contexts (e.g., Nowakowski & Kozlowski, 2005; Whitaker, Dahling & Levy, 2007). Whitaker et al (2007: 571) define the feedback environment as "the extent to which characteristics of the workplace encourage the use of inquiry". In their study of 170 subordinate-supervisor dyads they found that an open and cooperative feedback policy among supervisors led to increased feedback seeking behaviour. Feedback seeking clearly plays a central role in the self-regulation process (Ashford et al, 2003; Latham & Locke, 1991), but the current study highlights the value of looking at this in a contextually sensitive way.

Limitations

A small sample size might affect the empirical generalisability of the findings. However in repertory grid in- depth interviews, a sample size of ten is considered adequate and acceptable for theoretical conclusions to be drawn (Cassell & Walsh, 2004). It is important to acknowledge that the managers in this study were clearly very strongly identified with their management role and located this in the context of a strong commitment to organizational goals. It is also clear that they were all relatively confident in their management capability, but keen to learn from credible sources about how they could improve their performance in areas that provided less tangible proof of their capability or where they wanted to validate their approach to otherwise complex or novel situations. To this extent they were goal-oriented on a social categorical level, in the interests of the organization (Haslam, 2005), and took personal self-regulatory responsibility for performance improvement. A different sample of managers, less confident or experienced generally, and/or who were not so identified with organization interests and goals, may be more oriented to personal goals with different implications for feedback seeking. It was the purpose of our paper to investigate feedback seeking, but we acknowledge that future studies would benefit from an analysis of how feedback is made sense of and acted upon. We cannot discount the possibility that feedback seeking from external sources may disguise strategic and perhaps ego-centric motives, as this entails little accountability to anyone inside the organization.

Conclusion

The present study provides a starting point for more systematic consideration of how self and identity considerations interact with inquiry based feedback seeking tendencies. Future feedback seeking research could usefully locate this undertaking within a self-regulation model whilst appreciating the image and ego emotional sensitivities of feedback seeking and delivery in contingent contexts where performance considerations could occlude genuine learning.

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Table 1 Repertory grid interview elements and constructs

Participant	Elements: Managerial functions	Constructs
Case 1	Duty assignment, Communicating standards, Delegating, Training, Leadership- Team, Staff motivating, Supervision, Disciplining, Counselling.	Uncertainty of knowledge, uncertainty of performance, novelty of function
Case 2	Supervision, Assessment, Complaints, Appraisals, Zoning clients, Performance indicators, Positive Reporting, Duty Senior, Ordering Stock	More understanding, exploratory, curiosity, developmental, qualitativ complex, no fixed criteria, skill development
Case 3	Document preparation, Job/task allocation, Logistical Planning, Project management, Budget management, Work design, Managing relationships, Creative ideas	Uncertainty of performance, confirmation of approach, uncertainty of solutio beneficial information, new ideas.
Case 4	Publications, Admissions, Residences, Human Relations, Meetings, Disciplines, Salaries Administration, Annual Leave matters, Ceremonies.	Decision making, uncertainty of outcome, unique functions, unpredictab outcome/results, problem solving, new ideas
Case 5	Client interaction, Team interaction, Case management, Team formation/playing, Supervision, Forward planning, Time keeping, Policies/ procedures.	Function involves uncertainties, dynamic function, complex, difficult, crucial organisational goals, others views matter
Case 6	Quality control, Supervision, Time sheets, Interviews, Rotas, Books, Reporting, Appraisals.	Fundamental to organisational goals, unpredictable outcome, decisio making, non-procedural, critical function, personal development.
Case 7	Recruitment, Forecasting, Supervision, Training, Staffing, Communications, Meetings, Rewards/ Punishments, Performance evaluation.	Uncertainty of function, confirmation of results, interpersonal related, othe opinion, dynamic, perceptions
Case 8	Staff and Team development. Staff performance management, Facilitating meetings, Managing work, Monitoring standards, Financial management, Promoting individual rights, Managing change.	Uncertainty of delivery, uncertainty of methods, useful informatio organisational goals
Case 9	Teaching, Examining, Supervision, Research –Team, Internal Consultation, Managing (Team). External Consultation, Administration, Publishing.	Uncertainty of function , judgements, unpredictable outcome, new skills.
Case 10	Organising meetings, Attending meetings, Report writing, Organising conferences, Organising seminars, Presentations, Staff support, Project management. Proposal writing.	Difficult task, expertise, experience, novel ideas, exploratory.