Who Presents Worst?
A Study on Expressions of Negative Feedback in Different Intergroup Contexts

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Abstract

We studied the effect of two intergroup contexts (in-group and out-group) on the way people use verbal and nonverbal signals when giving feedback. Participants evaluated another person's low quality oral presentation by filling out evaluation forms and by making a personal video message for the speaker. Participants were led to believe that the addressee was either a fellow student (in-group condition) or a student from another university (out-group condition). We found no intergroup effect on *written* feedback. Next, independent judges rated feedback givers' appreciation in the video messages (*spoken* feedback) based on verbal and nonverbal expressions. When judging only the *verbal* content, messages addressed to out-group members were more appreciative than messages addressed to in-group members. When these messages were judged on the speaker's *nonverbal* expressions, messages addressed to in-group members were more appreciative than the messages to out-group members.

Index Terms: social interaction, nonverbal expressions, perception, intergroup communication, social identity theory, politeness.

1. Introduction

When someone asks your opinion about her new haircut that you happen to find horrifying, you could choose one of the following strategies to respond: you might either tell this person that she looks great, as a way of being polite, or you might decide to tell her that the new haircut does not suit her appearance at all, as a way of being honest. This paper addresses the question whether the choice for either of these responses varies as a function of the social distance you experience towards the addressee [1]. For example, would you respond differently to a close friend than to a comparative stranger? In addition, we investigate whether the kind of feedback depends on the way it is provided to the other person. For instance, would the tone of your message be different in a written statement compared to a more direct (e.g. face-to-face) situation in which the other person can see you while conveying the message?

People tend to base their decision on how to behave and express themselves in difficult social situations by applying pro-social conventions, such as being polite [2]. Pro-social conventions help individuals manage and modify their expressions, and serve as a guide to regulate their social interaction. We learn to apply and adjust such conventions to the distinctive social contexts they appear in [3, 4]. According to Goffman [5], our need to behave in a certain way in social contexts has primarily one aim: to fulfill our desired self-image. This image can be threatened by actions such as providing negative feedback, as it could interfere with the

speaker's social relation with the addressee. Therefore, such actions tend to depend on politeness strategies [1]. Interestingly, the use of these strategies that culminate how we provide negative feedback to different kinds of addressees can lead to conflicting outcomes, which we will discuss below.

On the one hand, people can use *negative* politeness strategies, which are based on the principle of respect and are often used in unfamiliar contexts. By acting polite, social distance will be maintained, and the threat of potential face loss is avoided [5]. In this way, we are less likely to be polite with people we are familiar with, than with unknown people. Subsequently, when formulating negative feedback, like a response on a bad haircut, we will probably be more tactful in an out-group setting, compared to an in-group setting.

On the other hand, we can also approach face-threatening actions like providing negative feedback with *positive* politeness strategies. Positive politeness strategies are used to maintain the positive self-image that is claimed for oneself by acting in a concordant manner. This is in accordance with the Social Identity Theory by Tajfel and Turner [6], which argues that we are more likely to treat in-group addressees as more favorable than out-group addressees, because our self-concept is based on the perceived (non-) membership of social groups. Apparently, the identity of social groups is not only characterized and formed by its members' personalities, but, conversely, the identity of social groups in turn gives meaning to their members' personality [7, 8, 9]. Regardless of our thoughts about someone's haircut, when we communicate a certain message to the outside world about it, this will implicitly affect our self-image on a certain level as well, as the person whom you are addressing could either belong to our in- or out-group. Consequently, we might care more about formulating a socially acceptable message addressed to in-group members, compared to out-group members. So based on positive politeness strategies and the social identity theory, one might expect negative feedback addressed to someone from the in-group to be less severe than when it is addressed to someone from the out-group.

In sum, it seems that predictions on the possible impact of the relationship with an addressee on giving negative feedback vary as a function of the theory within which they are framed. On the one hand, there is the concept of display rules [5] and negative politeness strategies [1], that suggest that when people interact with an out-group member, they are more likely to use pro-social, polite, display rules, than when they interact with in-group members. Therefore, it could be argued that when giving feedback, we are likely to treat out-group addressees more favorable than in-group addressees. On the other hand, positive politeness strategies [1] and the Social Identity Theory [6] pose the reverse; in-group members are likely to be favored over out-group members, due to a

need for solidarity and the maintenance of the feedback giver's self-concept.

Moreover, the impact of the relationship with the addressee in how we provide negative feedback is likely to depend on the nature of the communication and the ability to use (non) verbal expressions [2]. For example, when feedback is given directly to the addressee, the social context might be more important than when feedback is given indirectly, as speakers might be less aware of the consequences for an addressee in the latter case. The role of nonverbal expressions might be important here as well, as the use of nonverbal cues could evidently change the tone of a perhaps carefully formulated message. Earlier studies have shown that nonverbal features are of great importance for an addressee to determine the meaning of a verbal message [e.g., 10]. Therefore, it might be interesting to look into the function of nonverbal cues of negative feedback in different social contexts. However, to our knowledge, research on intergroup evaluations has not taken this aspect into account.

In the current study, we address these issues by comparing both verbal and nonverbal signals of feedback provided in an in-group and out-group context. We conducted an experiment in which participants evaluated a low quality oral presentation performed by either a fellow student (in–group context) or a student from another university (out-group context). The student's presentation was essentially the same in both conditions; except for the sweater she wore, which either was from the same or a different Dutch University. Participants were requested to first give written, less direct feedback (by filling out a questionnaire about the addressee's performance) followed by spoken, more direct feedback later on (by recording a personal video message addressed to the speaker) as described in section 2. After this, we conducted two perception studies, one based on the verbal and one on the nonverbal content of the personal video messages, which are described in section 3 (in which we let participants judge transcriptions of the messages) and section 4 (in which we let participants judge the accompanying nonverbal behavior).

2. Data collection

In this section, we describe the production experiment, in which participants give feedback by filling out a questionnaire (written feedback) and by recording a personal video message (spoken feedback).

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

In total, 30 students (18 women) of Tilburg University participated in the production experiment, with a mean age of 19 years (SD = 1.03). All were native speakers of Dutch, the language of the experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental settings: an in-group condition and an out-group condition. They received course credits for their contribution. All participants gave their consent for filming their feedback.

2.1.2. Stimuli

For collecting negative feedback, we showed our participants a four-minute long presentation on Dutch college grants, performed by a female actress (who was unfamiliar to all participants). Participants were told that the speaker was either a fellow student from Tilburg University (in the in-group condition) or a student from another Dutch university (Technical University Delft, situated approximately 100 kilometers to the north-west of Tilburg, in the out-group condition). In both conditions, however, participants saw essentially the same presentation, except that the speaker wore a different sweater (a Tilburg University sweater in the in-group condition and a Delft University sweater in the out-group condition), as shown in figure 1. We made sure that the presentation was likely to be judged as equally bad in both conditions, by letting the actress perform with a considerable amount of stutters, grammatical errors, unfinished sentences, sudden topic changes, misleading hand gestures and other imperfect presentation behavior, acted out with similar time intervals in both conditions.

2.1.3. Procedure

The experiment leader told participants that they were to take part in a study on presentational skills and that they had to judge a presentation performed by a student, in order to improve her skills. After the introduction, participants were asked to take place in front of a laptop, on which the presentation video was displayed. After the video clip had been shown, participants were asked to provide the speaker with feedback, by filling out a questionnaire that included nine questions about the speaker's performance. Examples of items in the questionnaire are "Do you think the structure of the presentation is clear?" and "Do you think the presenter has an active attitude?" Response options for the items,
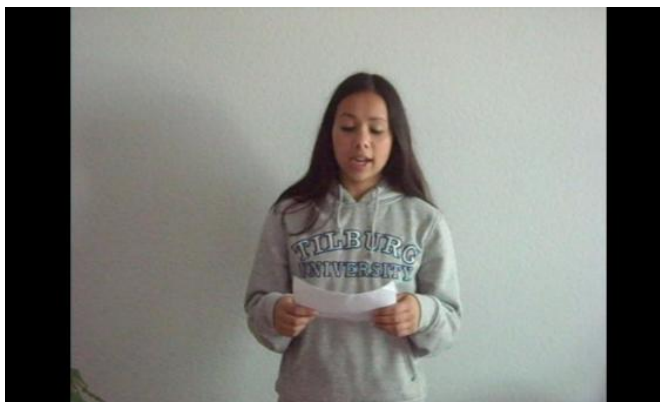
Figure 1: *Stills of the actress performing a low quality oral presentation in an in-group condition, wearing a Tilburg University sweater (left) and in an out-group condition, wearing a Delft University sweater (right).*

presented on a seven-point Likert scale, ranged from 1 (*no, absolutely not*) to 7 (*yes, absolutely*). Only when the video was finished and participants had filled out the questionnaire, did the experiment leader introduce the participants to the second part of the experiment, of which they had not been informed beforehand. Participants were asked to provide feedback and elaborate on their ratings by recording a personal video message. There was no time limit on this assignment. The experimenter told participants that this video message would be shown to the speaker directly, in order to provide feedback on her presentation skills. Participants individually completed the production task in quiet rooms in the Tilburg University library.

2.2. Results

The average score for all individual items combined (with a fairly acceptable Cronbach's alpha of .77) was rated as very poor ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.78$). As illustrated in figure 2, all participants found that the presenter performed poorly (with a score less than four on a seven-point Likert scale) on every item of the questionnaire.

We conducted a univariate ANOVA with intergroup context as a factor and participants' mean score as our dependent variable. There was no effect of the intergroup contexts on participant ratings, $F(1,28) < 1$, *ns*. In their ratings, participants were not more polite when judging the presentation performances of an in-group member or more honest when similarly judging an out-group member.

2.3. Discussion

In this section, we found that overall participants' ratings of presentation skills were low, and there appeared to be no effect of an in-group or out-group context. This indicates that our manipulation worked as intended: the in- and out-group presentations were rated as equally poor on all dimensions. However, the less direct, non-social situation (by the use of Lickert scales) in which participants gave feedback, might have overruled any group favoritism. Having shown that intergroup context did not seem to affect written, non-social judgments, our next step was to investigate intergroup effects when people provide more direct, spoken personal feedback. Therefore, we conducted two judgments studies in which we analyzed the verbal and nonverbal content of the recordings of the personal video messages.

3. Perception study - verbal

In this section, we describe the perception task in which participants rated the appreciativeness of the transcriptions of the verbal message recorded in the production experiment.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

In total, 20 participants (13 women), with a mean age of 28 ($SD = 5.83$) judged the verbal messages. All were native speakers of Dutch. None of the judges had participated in the production part of this research described above, or were familiar with any people who had participated.

3.1.2. Stimuli

As there was no time limit on giving feedback in the production experiment, the duration of the personal messages we used for the judging task varied with a mean duration of 66 seconds. Yet, we found no effect of the intergroup context on either the duration of the messages, $F(1, 29)= 1.04$, *ns,* or the amount of words participants used, $F(1, 29)= 1.15$, *ns.* To keep experimental time within reasonable limits, we did not use all the recordings, but randomly selected 10 messages with an equal distribution of an in-group and out-group context that we used in both our perception studies. For studying the perception of the verbal message, transcriptions of these 10 messages were used as stimuli in the first perception study. An example of a transcription from the out-group condition is [English translation of Dutch original]:

"OK, honestly, I thought your presentation was really bad, mainly because you didn't even think the topic was interesting yourself. You showed no enthusiasm about it at all. That was the worst thing about this presentation, and the reason you could not make a nice and interesting story of it. Next time, you'd better choose a topic that suits your interests more" – participant 12 (in-group condition).

3.1.3. Procedure

In an online survey, participants were asked to read transcriptions of the personal video messages, recorded by people that had watched a presentation. First, the identification number of the stimuli was presented (1 through 10), followed by
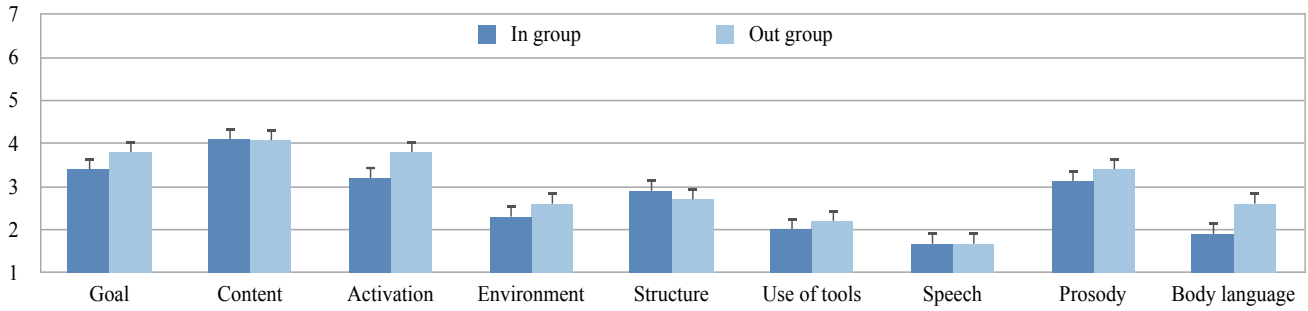
Figure 2: *The perceived appreciation (indirect feedback) as a function of intergroup context.*

the transcription. They were asked to rate the feedback givers' appreciation of the presentation, ("To what extend do you think that the feedback giver has appreciated the presentation that he or she has just seen?") on a seven-point Likert scale, ranged from 1 (*very low appreciation*) to 7 (*very high appreciation*). To familiarize the participants with the perception task, the experiment was preceded by a training phase containing transcriptions of one in-group message and one out-group message, selected from the other transcriptions. All 10 transcriptions were shown to the participants in one of two random orders to compensate for possible order effects.

3.2. Results

To test for significance, we used a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with intergroup context (in-group, out-group) as a within-subjects factor and the perceived level of appreciation as dependent variable. As shown in figure 3, we found an effect of intergroup context, $F(1,19) = 27.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .60$. It appeared that when people rated the appreciation of the verbal feedback in an in-group condition, it was substantially lower (M = 2.76, SD = .11) than when they had to rate feedback in an out-group condition (M = 3.40, SD = .13). We found no gender effects.

3.3. Discussion

Results show that when only the verbal part of the personal feedback messages is presented, it is judged as being less negative for out-group members than for in-group members, which implies the use of negative politeness strategies by speakers [1]. Apparently, when formulating feedback, people tend to be more polite with people from other groups, compared to people belonging to their in-group. This is in contrast with the assumption that due to maintaining a positive self-image, members of one's own group would be favored over out-group members [6]. Our next step is to explore how people perceive the appreciation of feedback givers, based on an assessment of only their nonverbal expressions.
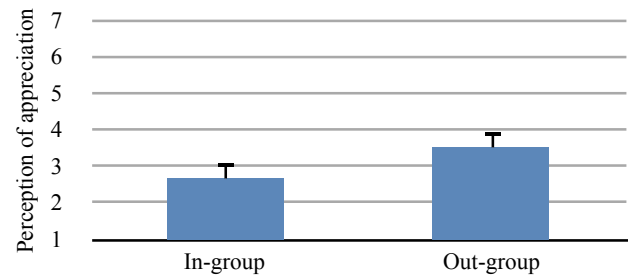

Figure 3: *The perceived appreciation (based on the text of the video messages) as a function of intergroup context.*

4. Perception study - nonverbal

This section describes the second perception task in which participants judge the appreciativeness of the message recorded earlier, by watching the video clips without any sound.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

In total, 31 Dutch participants (18 women), with a mean age of 24 (SD = 3.45), judged the soundless video messages. Again, none of the participants of the second judgment task had participated in either the production study or the first judgment task, as described earlier in this report, or were familiar with any people who had.

4.1.2. Stimuli

For this perception task, stimuli were based on the same video messages we used for the transcriptions of the first judgment task (10 fragments, with an equal distribution of an in-group and out-group context). All video messages were presented without the sound of the speaker, as we were only interested in the perception of speakers' nonverbal expressions, and not in the perception of the actual content of the messages (for examples of stills, see figure 4).

Figure 4: *Stills of personal video messages that were used as stimuli for the second judgment task (left: in-group condition, right: out-group condition).*

4.1.3. Procedure

The procedure of the nonverbal judgment task was as similar as possible to the procedure of the first (verbal) perception task. All 10 video messages were shown to the participants in one of two random orders. First, the identification number of the stimulus was presented (1 through 10), followed by the actual stimulus. During an inter-stimulus interval of three seconds the screen turned black, and as with the verbal judgment task, participants were asked to rate the speaker's appreciation of the presentation, on a seven-point Likert scale, ranged from 1 (*very low appreciation*) to 7 (*very high appreciation*). To ensure that participants were familiar with the perception task, the experiment was preceded by a training phase containing one video message from each of the two conditions.

4.2. Results

We used a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with intergroup context (in-group and out-group) as a within-subjects factor and the perceived level of appreciation as dependent variable. As can be seen in figure 5, we found an effect of intergroup context, $F(1,29) = 14.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .34$. It appeared that when people rated the appreciation based on the nonverbal behavior in an out-group condition, it was substantially lower (M = 4.40, SD = .71) than when they had to rate feedback in an in-group condition (M = 3.82, SD = .57). Again, there were no gender effects.
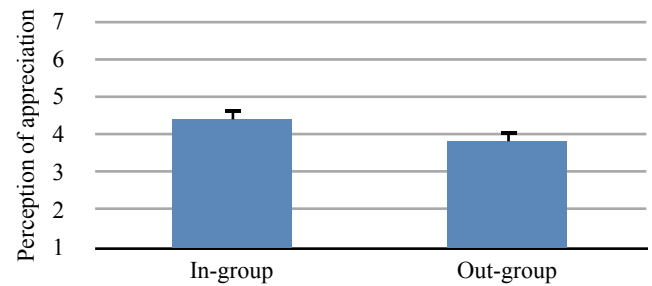

Figure 5: *The perceived appreciation (based on soundless video messages) as a function of intergroup context.*

4.3. Discussion

Results of the nonverbal perception task show that, based on soundless feedback videos, in-group feedback is perceived as more appreciative than out-group feedback. In other words, when looking merely at the speakers' facial expressions, participants showed more appreciation for members of their own group than out-group members. It seems that when providing feedback, the use of facial expressions fits better in positive politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson [1], which is in line with the Social Identity Theory [6].

5. General discussion and conclusion

In the current research, we studied the effect of two social interaction contexts (in-group and out-group) on the way people give feedback. We focused on both verbal and nonverbal feedback signals in response to a low quality presentation. Predictions on possible outcomes varied as a function of the theory within which they were framed. The concept of display rules [5] suggests that we are likely to treat out-group addressees more favorable than in-group addressees, because people are more likely to use negative politeness strategies when interacting with an out-group member [1]. However, the Social Identity Theory [7] poses the reverse: due to maintenance of the feedback giver's self-concept, in-group members are likely to be favored over out-group members, by using positive politeness strategies [1].

Regarding the way people provide scores on rating scales, we found no effect of intergroup context. Participants judged performances of in- and out-group addressees as equally poor, according to the filled out judgment forms. This suggests that in a relatively indirect feedback situation (like with filling out evaluation forms) judges do not take the social context into account, but rather seem to rely solely on their own 'honest' assessment. The consequences for an addressee do not seem to play a substantial role when providing feedback through an evaluation form. Of course, evaluators might respond differently in circumstances in which there is more awareness of the social context, as in a video message addressed to the presenter.

Indeed, we found that when participants were asked to provide addressees with a more direct form of feedback, by recording a personal message, the intergroup context did seem to affect the way participants give feedback. Interestingly, when comparing the two perception studies (of the verbal and nonverbal part of the feedback message), contrasting results were

found. It appeared that when judging only the *verbal* content of the personal feedback messages, people tend to be more appreciative in messages addressed to out-group members than in the messages addressed to in-group members, which is in accordance with the negative politeness strategies. It seems that participants were more likely to use such social conventions and that participants more tactful in out-group settings, when formulating feedback messages.

However, a second judgment study revealed that when these messages were only judged on the basis of the *nonverbal* behaviour performed by the speaker, the messages addressed to in-group members were considered to be more appreciative than the messages to out-group members. This finding is consistent with the Social Identity Theory [6] and fits positive politeness strategies, that states that in-group members are likely to be favored over out-group members, because making judgments about in-group members affect the feedback giver's self-concept. Using facial expressions for signalling appreciation might make the verbal message more acceptable. It is plausible that when people need to say something negative to an in-group member, they will make sure to soften it by using more positive nonverbal expressions; and with an out-group addressee they may choose their words carefully, but at the cost of less clarity and a higher risk of ambiguity, which might get compensated for by harsher gaze and mimics. Possibly, this effect is due to the fact that nonverbal expressions might be more difficult to control than speech [11]. They could also relate to findings of Mehrahiam and Morton [10], who state that nonverbal cues are of great importance for an addressee to determine the meaning of a (verbal) message.

In conclusion, it seems that the results of our study about the way people give feedback to different kinds of addressees lend support to both competing views presented above, albeit on different levels of social interaction. When we focus merely on the content of the feedback message, we tend to be polite with out-group members. However, our nonverbal expressions seem to soften this accompanying verbal message. Nonetheless, these results imply that both verbal and nonverbal elements of messages are important for signalling feedback and future research should take both verbal and nonverbal utterances into account, when examining intergroup processes.

6. Acknowledgements

7. References

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