Giving Negative Evaluations in Romantic Relationships

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People in romantic relationships often have to give honest but potentially hurtful evaluations to their partners. Providing constructive criticism has always been an intriguing topic for interpersonal communication researchers. The current scenario study examined two factors (order and specificity enhancement) that might affect people's perceptions of negative evaluations from their partners. Findings showed strong support for an order effect: positive-first messages (enhancement before negative evaluations) were perceived more positively than positive-after messages (enhancement after negative evaluations) and bald-on-record negative evaluations. No significant effect of enhancement specificity (issue-specific enhancement or general enhancement) was detected, except that general enhancement messages were perceived as more polite when said before rather than after negative evaluations.

Keywords: negative evaluations, romantic relationship, enhancement messages, face-threatening act

Introduction

People in close relationships offer evaluative messages to each other about numerous aspects of their lives (Jussim, Coleman, & Nassau, 1989). These evaluations can make people feel good or bad, help them make life decisions, and inform their sense of self (DePaulo & Bell, 1996). Katz and Joiner (2002) argued that evaluations from close partners help people grow and mature.

Empirical studies on the effect of evaluative feedback have generated mixed results. For example, Moring and Epstein (1997) indicated that people prefer feedback from their partners that makes them feel better about themselves, despite whether or not the feedback confirms their self-views. This view is supported by positive illusion effect in close relationships. Two studies by Murray and colleagues suggested that people are more satisfied when partners hold overly positive perceptions of them (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Murray & Holmes, 1997). In contrast, another view is that honest and accurate feedback offers confirmation to partners. Consistent with self-verification theory, Katz and Joiner (2002) found that participants in dating relationships reported more commitment and intimacy when their self-evaluations were consistent with their partner's evaluations of them. Overall, experimental research on the effects of evaluative feedback on self-appraisals indicates a general trend: positive feedback increases subsequent positive self-appraisal, while negative feedback decreases one's self-assessment (e.g., Jussim et al., 1992).

In everyday conversations, however, few of our messages are purely negative. When we have to give negative comments, we often combine them with positive ones to soften the harshness of the language. In a series of studies on honest but hurtful (HBH) evaluative messages in close relationships, Zhang and colleagues found that recipients of HBH messages could detect the enhancement motivation from the speaker and that such perceived enhancement motivations were positively associated with the perceived relational outcomes of those messages (Zhang & Stafford, 2008, 2009; Zhang, 2009). Zhang and Stafford (2009) suggested that expressing one's enhancement motivation when one has to give honest but potentially hurtful evaluations could decrease the level of face threat and increase positive relational outcomes.

The question now is how we should add enhancement elements to negative or potentially hurtful evaluations. Two specific goals guide the present research project. First, we want to test whether the sequential order makes a difference. In other words, when we have to give negative evaluations, should

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we say positive or enhancement messages before negative evaluations, or vice versa? A second purpose of the study is to test whether the issue-specificity of the enhancement message affects how the evaluations are received. For example, when we give negative evaluations of one's academic ability, should we supply a general enhancement message on one's personality (e.g., "You are a nice person.") or an issue-specific message on one's intelligence (e.g., "You are very smart.")? Thus, the current study uses a 2 (positive comments before or after negative evaluations) x 2 (issue-specific versus general enhancement) design, with a comparison group of negative comments only.

Literature Review

Politeness Theory

A useful theoretical framework in the research on negative evaluations is politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987). One basic assumption of politeness theory is that face can be threatened or honored in social interactions. Brown and Levinson (1987) claimed that three factors influence people's perception of the amount of face threat: relational distance between the speaker and the hearer, the power of the speaker over the hearer, and the culturally defined ranking of the face-threatening acts. Brown and Levinson suggested that as the magnitude of the face threat increases, a speaker is more likely to use polite forms of address. When little threat is anticipated, a face-threatening act (FTA) is likely to be committed directly and efficiently (bald-on-record). When the magnitude of the face threat increases, a speaker may: (a) use some indirectness methods, in which the speaker uses hints to communicate his/her intentions implicitly; (b) use some face redressive actions, such as expressing understanding or sympathy with the hearer (positive face redress) or depersonalizing the message (negative face redress); or (c) decline to commit an FTA to avoid face threat. In sum, politeness theory offers "a functional explanation for why languages have certain features and for how people can arrive at a shared understanding of those features" (Goldsmith, 2000, p. 260).

Goldsmith (2000) suggested that there are two limitations in the fact that politeness theory is grounded in the speech act as a unit of analysis. On the one hand, it implies that face threat arises from features of a speech act rather than the goals speakers bring to the act (Jacobs & Jackson, 1989). On the other hand, it does not consider the ways "in which inferences about goals rely on sequential placements of acts in an interaction" (Goldsmith, 2000, p. 2). There is empirical evidence to support Goldsmith's speculations. First, Wilson et al. (1998) found that interaction goals influence the levels of perceived face threat. Specifically, they found that young adults perceived different levels of face threat when they had different situational goals such as giving advice, asking a favor, or enforcing obligations with a same-sex friend. A central tenet of identity implication theory by Wilson and colleagues is that features of the context affect the appraisals of face threat (Wilson et al., 1998; Wilson, Kunkel, Robson, Olufowote, & Soliz, 2009). Second, results from Goldsmith (2000) indicated that the sequential placement of advice had a significant effect on the degree to which advice was seen as solicited, which in turn, was related to the perceived regard for face. Later work by Goldsmith and colleagues (e.g., Goldsmith & MacGeroge, 2000) suggested the need to explore the effects upon face threats of motivations underlying messages.

For this current project, we continue to test the sequential effect suggested by Goldsmith (2000). Specifically, we try to examine two types of repair messages, that is, general enhancement and issue-specific enhancement, which we will elaborate on below.

Order Effect

In the research on social support offered to distressed individuals, Burleson and Goldsmith (1998) suggested that messages would be most beneficial when "the distressed other can give free voice to his or her feelings and explore those feelings fully" (p. 263). Thus, Feng (2009) argued that offering emotional support before advice giving would be more effective, as it provides the target person with an opportunity to work through his or her problems. Feng's speculation received support, in that advice was evaluated more positively when it was offered following emotional support than before or without emotional support.

Feng's (2009) argument and findings can also find support from Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-preserving strategies. In the example of how "troubles" are broached and received, Brown and Levinson believed a greeting such as "how are you" before telling the trouble focuses on the target's welfare and self-esteem, thus mitigating the potential face threat. On the other hand, enhancement messages after bald-on-record comments would be seen as redressive strategies used to minimize the face threat of the comments. Thus, we propose:

> **H1:** Messages with the sequence of enhancement before negative evaluations (positive before negative) will be perceived more positively than messages with the sequence of enhancement after negative evaluations (positive after negative) or messages without enhancement, that is, bald-on-record messages only (negative only).

Although bald-on-record messages might be perceived as most face-threatening, they can achieve maximum efficiency (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Brown and Levinson suggest messages with redress might decrease the communicated urgency. Therefore, we predict:

> **H2:** Bald-on-record negative evaluations (negative only) will be perceived as more effective than messages with enhancement elements (positive before negative, or positive after negative).

Issue-Specificity of Enhancement

Neff and Karney (2002) called for a distinction between global and specific perceptions of partners in the research on close relationships. They defined global perceptions as "a large number of distinct behaviors" and specific perceptions as "relatively few distinct behaviors" (p. 1083). They believed global views would help close partners to see the big picture of the relationship. As a result, close partners are motivated to enhance each other more on global rather than specific attributes. They found that global traits were rated as significantly more desirable than specific ones, and that satisfied couples described their partners' positive traits in more global terms and negative traits in more specific terms.

Leary et al. (1998) defined hurtful feelings as perceptions that one does not feel as "important, close, or valuable" to the partner as one desires. Thus, a message that criticizes a partner's physical appearance may be perceived as hurtful ultimately because the partner perceives relational devaluation in the message. What happens if we criticize the partner on one domain of their life, be it physical appearance or intellectual ability or athletic ability, but we enhance them in general, such as giving them relational confirmation (e.g., "I still love you the same")? In the current study, we want to test whether the specificity of enhancement (general versus issue-specific) differs when offering negative evaluations to partners.

> **RQ1:** Will the enhancement messages at different specificity levels (general versus issue-specific) be rated differently?

RQ2: Will the enhancement messages at different specificity levels (general versus issue-specific) be perceived as equally effective?

Method

Participants

Participants (N = 148) were recruited from communication studies classes at a medium-sized university in the southern region of the United States. Once IRB approval was obtained, participants were provided with a link to one of five versions of an online survey and offered extra credit for completing it. The sample was 28.1% male and 71.9% female, with a total of 13 participants failing to indicate their gender. In age, participants ranged from 18 to 49 (M = 22.54, SD = 5.34). They were mostly upperclassmen, 43.4% juniors and 32.4% seniors, with the remaining percentage being freshmen and sophomores. With regard to ethnicity, 60.4% of the participants were white, 24.6% African American, 11.9% Hispanic, 1.5% Asian, and 1.5% Native American.

Overall Survey Structure and Procedure

Zhang and Stafford (2008, 2009) have identified four types of hurtful evaluative messages in romantic relationships, relational (e.g., You like to flirt with others), dispositional (e.g., You are lazy), behavioral (e.g., You drink too much) and physical appearance (e.g., You smell bad). In this project, we designed our scenarios focusing on evaluating partners' physical appearance. Participants read a scenario in which they were asked to imagine that they were in a long-term romantic relationship and, as they are trying on a new set of recently purchased clothes, their partner comes to them. They ask the partner about their appearance in the new set of clothes, and the partner responds with one of five different versions of a message designed to encourage the participant to lose some weight. These five message versions were designed to operationalize the key predictor variables in the study, which we explicate in the following section.

Once consent was obtained, participants were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time to ensure ethical adherence. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the five message conditions. Next, they responded to a series of Likert-type scales designed to gauge their evaluation of the partner's and the message's communication qualities. Also, using one Likert-type item ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely) we asked participants to indicate how likely they would be to lose weight given the message their partner had just communicated to them (effectiveness of the message). At the end of the survey, demographic information was collected from each of the respondents.

In addition, as an ecological validity check on the realism of the scenario and the partner's responses, we asked participants, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to indicate how believable the scenario was, how likely the partner's response would be in real life, and how likely it would be that people would encounter this situation in real life. Mean responses to these realism items ranged from 4.6 to 5.3, that is, all of the means were above the "neutral" midpoint (4), suggesting that participants generally agreed that the scenario and responses were more realistic than not. The internal consistency of these three items assessing realism, as measured by Cronbach's α, was .81.

Predictor Variables

The five versions of the romantic partner's message requesting that the participant lose weight, only one of which was read and responded to by each participant, were designed to manipulate the key predictor variables of the order of the positive (praise) and negative (the need to lose weight) portions of the request (positive-negative or negative-positive), and the specificity or generality of the positive portion of the request. Of the five versions, the first was used as a baseline message in which there was no

positive portion of the request to be manipulated. We refer to this version as a straightforward request. The five versions are labeled and quoted below.

Straightforward

"It does look like you have gained weight. I can tell your clothes are tighter than normal. You really need to lose a few pounds" (*n* =30).

General Positive with Positive-Negative Order

"You know I love you very much. You mean the world to me. It does look like you have gained weight. I can tell your clothes are tighter than normal. You really need to lose a few pounds" (*n* = 34).

Specific Positive with Positive-Negative Order

"You know you are very attractive to me. But it does look like you have gained weight. I can tell your clothes are tighter than normal. You really need to lose a few pounds" (*n* = 24).

General positive with negative-positive order.

"It does look like you have gained weight. I can tell your clothes are tighter than normal. You really need to lose a few pounds. You know I love you very much. You mean the world to me" (*n* = 25).

Specific Positive with Negative-Positive Order

"It does look like you have gained weight. I can tell your clothes are tighter than normal. You really need to lose a few pounds. But you know you are still very attractive to me" (*n* = 35).

Outcome Variables

This study's dependent variables fell into two general categories: perceptions of the partner and his/her message, as well as behavioral intentions to lose weight based on the partner's message. In previous research on the influence of a variety of message and receiver characteristics on message interpretations, Edwards, Bello, and colleagues have focused on several key elements of positively versus negatively-valenced interpretations: the perceptions by the receiver of the degree of politeness, honesty, and competence of the message in question (Bello & Edwards, 2005; Bello, Brandau-Brown, & Ragsdale, 2008; Edwards & Bello, 2001). In the process, they have successfully confirmed hypotheses using relatively brief and simple measures of each of these three elements of interpretation, helping to establish their validity. These involve seven-point Likert-type statements (strongly disagree to strongly agree) about aspects of the message (and its sender) to which participants respond. We chose to use these instruments in the present study, modified slightly to reflect the sender as a romantic partner.

Each of these measures contains at least one reverse-coded item to help mitigate response bias. The measurement of perceived politeness consists of five items (e.g., "My partner was trying to make everyone feel good" and "My partner was rude" [reverse coded]), honesty of five items (e.g., "My partner was willing to speak her/his mind" and "I did not trust my partner" [reverse coded]), and competence of four items (e.g., "My partner was good at expressing thoughts" and "My partner was a poor communicator" [reverse coded]). In previous research, the internal reliabilities (Cronbach's α) of these scales have been good, ranging from .84 to .92 for politeness, .79 to .92 for honesty, and .71 to .85 for competence (Bello et al., 2008; Edwards & Bello, 2001). In the present study, the internal reliabilities were .88, .79, and .86, respectively.

Because the appropriateness of a communicator and his/her message is closely related to competence and politeness (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984) and because we believed, therefore, that it might be associated with the tendency to follow the advice given in the message requesting weight loss, we included a series of items to measure perceived appropriateness. The items, a total of seven, were adapted from the Conversational Appropriateness Scale, for which validity and internal reliability have been established (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987, 1989, 1990), and used the same seven-point Likert-type scale as

the previous measures of message interpretation (see above). Internal reliability (Cronbach's α) was .85. Sample items included "My partner's statements made me feel uncomfortable" (reverse coded) and "Everything my partner said was appropriate." As indicated earlier, the effectiveness of the message was measured using one item asking participants about their likelihood of losing weight.

Results

Hypotheses and research questions were tested using multivariate analyses (MANOVAs). Pillai's trace test was conducted to test the statistical power of the MANOVAs. The sample sizes of participants in the five conditions (e.g., five different versions) of the survey ranged from 24 to 35. At the significance level of .05 with a medium effect size of .25, a sample size of 24 resulted in a statistical power of .829. A sample size of 35 yielded a statistical power of .971. Thus, the sample size of this study ensured a reasonable statistical power.

The independent variables were order (3 levels: positive first, positive after, and bald-on-record) and specificity (3 levels: issue-specific enhancement, general enhancement, and bald-on-record). The outcome variables were perceived politeness, honesty, competence, appropriateness, and perceived likelihood of change. There was one significant interaction effect between order and specificity of enhancement on politeness, F (1, 123) = 9.84, p < .05. Specifically, issue-specific enhancement messages were seen very similarly in terms of politeness when they were said before (M = 3.61, SD = 1.03) or after (M = .359, SD = 1.45) negative evaluations, but general enhancement messages were perceived as more polite when they were said before (M = 4.20, SD = 1.20) rather than after (M = 2.94, SD = 1.24). No other interaction effects were found.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that positive-first messages (that is, enhancement before negative evaluations) would be perceived more positively than positive-after messages (that is, enhancement after negative evaluations) and bald-on-record negative evaluations (negative only). The MANOVA tests generally supported H1. Positive-first messages were seen as more polite, F (1, 123) = 6.79, p < .05, more honest F (1, 123) = 6.80, p < .05, more competent F (1, 123) = 6.67, p < .05, and more appropriate F (1, 123) = 5.99, p < .05.

Scheffe post hoc analysis showed positive-first messages (M = 3.95, SD = 1.15) were perceived as more *polite* than positive after (M = 3.30, SD = 1.39), and bald-on-record messages (M = 2.88, SD = 1.34). Positive-first messages (M = 6.24, SD = .63) were more *honest* than positive-after messages (M = 5.81, SD = .97), but at similar level of bald-on-record messages (M = 6.32, SD = .76). Positive-first messages (M = 4.78, SD = 1.30) were more *competent* than positive-after messages (M = 4.09, SD = 1.45), but at similar level of bald-on-record messages (M = 4.13, SD = 1.54). Positive-first messages (M = 3.84, SD = 1.14) were more *appropriate* than positive-after messages (M = 3.22, SD = 1.28), and bald-on-record messages (M = 3.19, SD = 1.38).

Hypothesis 2 suggested that bald-on-record messages (negative only) would be more effective than messages with positive elements (positive before negative or positive after negative). This hypothesis was not supported, F (1, 123) = 1.03, p > .05. Although this hypothesis was not supported, the mean of bald-on-record messages (M = 6.25, SD = .79) was the highest in terms of likelihood to change, compared with positive-first messages (M = 5.49, SD = 1.72) and positive-after messages (M = 5.85, SD = 1.05). Research Question 1 asked whether enhancement specificity would make a difference in terms of message evaluations. Research Question 2 asked whether enhancement specificity would make a difference in effectiveness. The results did not show any significant differences. One exception was the interaction effect reported earlier. That is, general enhancement messages were perceived as more polite when they were said before (M = 4.20, SD = 1.20) rather than after (M = 2.94, SD = 1.24) negative evaluations. No other difference was found.

Discussion

People in close relationships often encounter situations where they must give honest but potentially hurtful evaluations to their partners. How to give constructive criticism has always been an intriguing topic for interpersonal communication researchers. The current scenario study examined two factors (order and enhancement specificity) that might affect people's perceptions of negative evaluations from their partners. Findings showed strong support for an order effect in that positive-first messages (enhancement before negative evaluations) were perceived more positively than positive-after messages (enhancement after negative evaluations) and bald-on-record negative evaluations. No significant enhancement specificity effect was detected except that general enhancement messages were perceived as more polite when they were said before rather than after negative evaluations. These findings reveal significant theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical Implications

There is limited previous literature on how to give constructive negative evaluations in close relationships. The current study serves as a reminder that face threats can be minimized depending on how we say things. One of the major contributions of our study to understanding and extending politeness theory is the detection of order effect. In the original account of the theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) state that redressive actions that "give face to the addressee" (p. 69) would reduce the potential face damage. Our study extends the theory by indicating the order of redressive actions makes a difference in the appraisal of the face threat of a message. This finding adds to the growing body of research (e.g., Johnson, 2007; Knobloch, Satterlee, & DiDomenico, 2010) that the conceptualization of face threat is more complicated than originally proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987).

Specifically, messages with the order of positive comments before negative evaluations (positive-negative) were found to be more polite, honest, competent, and appropriate than messages with the order of negative evaluations followed by positive enhancement (negative-positive) and negative-only evaluations. This finding is consistent with Feng (2009), lending support to Burleson and Goldsmith's (1998) conversationally induced reappraisal (CIR) model. It also shows the importance of situational parameters in the appraisals of face threat, which the original politeness theory by Brown and Levinson did not address (Lim & Bowers, 1991; Wilson et al., 1998; 2009). Offering support or enhancement before negative evaluations can function in at least three ways: a) explicitly showing the primary goal of enhancement rather than criticizing, thus reducing the level of face threat of negative evaluations that follow, b) providing support to the self-esteem of the message recipient, and c) giving relational confirmation to the recipient so that the recipient will still feel valued, appreciated, and important.

Secondly, our finding lends support to Brown and Levinson's (1987) argument that bald-on-record messages can have potential advantages because they are the "most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise" (p. 69). Although evaluations with the positive-negative order were perceived as more polite, honest, competent, and appropriate, they were not seen as more effective. In contrast, bald-on-record messages received the highest mean in terms of likelihood to change, compared with positive-first or positive-after messages. This result, however, did not achieve statistical significance. Because the mean trend was as predicted, future research might well re-visit this issue, especially considering that Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that direct messages can be most effective.

Thirdly, our study emphasizes the importance of enhancement messages, rather than levels of specificity, in reducing face threats when giving negative evaluations. Two of our research questions asked if enhancement messages at different specificity levels (general versus issue-specific) would be rated as more polite and more effective. Results showed participants' perceptions of messages with different levels did not differ. This indicates that enhancement messages function well in support of one's relational needs, regardless of the message being general or specific.

Practical Implications

The results of this study offer some practical implications on how we should give negative evaluations in close relationships. First, as indicated earlier, the order of how we say things matters. When we have to give negative evaluations to our partners, it is best to express our enhancement motives before we articulate the negative messages. Of course, expressing one's enhancement motive does not imply that our partner would necessarily agree with, or appreciate those motives. However, communicating one's motivations might help the partner know one's intentions in the message and possibly lessen face threat. Second, although bald-on-record messages were rated as less polite and less appropriate than positive-first messages, such messages received the highest mean in terms of effectiveness. If our number one goal is to get the message across to our partner, bald-on-record messages might be the choice, though they may not sound as nice. Third, the levels of enhancement specificity did not differ in terms of message appropriateness or effectiveness. Thus, when we express our enhancement motives to the partner, we could use general or issue-specific supportive messages to make our partner feel loved and appreciated.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations deserve our attention. First, in this study, we used scenarios where one receives negative comments on their physical appearance. Results might be different when we give comments to partners in domains such as athletic ability, intellectual ability, personality, or behaviors. In future follow-up studies, using scenarios in areas other than physical appearance is necessary.

Secondly, the manipulation of enhancement specificity also needs to be improved. In this study, we used "I love you" as general enhancement, and "You are attractive to me" as issue-specific enhancement. If we use a different type of general enhancement, for example, "you are a nice person," results might be different. In everyday situations, we sometimes enhance a person in terms of their personality when we criticize their physical appearance.

Thirdly, in the discussion of constructive criticism, a sandwich method (positive-negative-positive) is proposed by Kohn and O'Connell (2005). Future research should include scenarios with the sandwich method in comparison with positive-first messages.

Lastly, the sample size, the discrepancy between the numbers of male and female participants, and the nature of the student sample may influence the validity of the results. Had we had a bigger sample size, we might have found significant differences in the outcome variable of likelihood to change. In addition, due to different social expectations and roles, females could be more likely to use positive-first messages than males when giving negative evaluations. Future research should investigate whether this would alter the scope of our findings. Plus, using a convenient student sample always poses problems for the generalization of findings to a larger population. A community sample should, therefore, be recruited for future research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our study finds that giving enhancement before negative evaluations was rated as more positive than giving enhancement after negative evaluations and bald-on-record negative evaluations. This scenario study is an initial investigation into the order effects of giving negative evaluations in close relationships. Although there remains a lot of research to be done before we can draw more definitive inferences, this study has provided an important basis upon which future research can be conducted to replicate the current study and investigate the order effect further.

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