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Words versus numbers: A theoretical exploration of giving and receiving narrative comments in performance appraisal

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ABSTRACT

Performance ratings have long dominated research on performance appraisal yet very little is known about the usage of narrative comments despite the fact that they are a common methodology to assess performance in organizations. Using theoretical streams from the fields of industrial–organizational psychology, communication, and human resource management, this paper explores the implications of using narrative comments for the various stakeholders in the performance appraisal process. The psychological processes underlying the production of narrative comments are explored. The paper also discusses the processes related to the reception and the impact of receiving performance information in this format for evaluatees.
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"The medium is the message."

(Marshall McLuhan, 1964)

1. Introduction

A cursory look at performance appraisal research is sufficient to discover the overwhelming attention given to quantitative approaches (Pearce & Porter, 1986). Indeed, most of what is known about the process of evaluating individual performance in organizations hinges on the use of numerical ratings, a proven yet relatively narrow operationalization of this process. In organizational practice, however, performance appraisal systems are not really limited to rating scales. These systems also include a qualitative component in the form of narrative comments (e.g., Rose & Walsh, 2004; Smither & Walker, 2004; Timmreck & Bracken, 1995; Woods, Sciarini, & Breiter, 1998). While it is difficult to pinpoint the prototypical performance appraisal process, it is fair to assume that a majority of them combine quantitative and qualitative formats. That is, most individuals going through the task of evaluating others are presented with a rating scale and with an opportunity to write comments about the target of their evaluations. Conversely, those being evaluated are also presented with quantitative data (often at an aggregate level) and with comments that have been written about them.

Even so, the role of narrative comments in performance appraisal has rarely been the subject of systematic investigation and only very recently has some researchers begun to focus on this element. For example, Gillipsie, Rose, and Robinson (2006) used experts to code the clarity of comments provided as part of a 360-degree feedback exercise. The results of this study indicate significant variation in the clarity of comments across sources: comments provided by supervisors and subordinates were significantly clearer than comments from peers. In a longitudinal study on the impact of comments, Smither and Walker (2004) also uncovered a weak but significant link between the characteristics of comments provided by direct reports and the subsequent

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performance of recipients. More specifically, these authors found that a combination of the valence of comments, their specificity, and how many of these comments were provided explained a small but significant portion of individual improvement. While these research efforts hint at the rich dynamic that underlies the production and reception of narrative comments, there is an overall lack of consideration for narrative comments in performance appraisal research. This is problematic not only because this element is typical of the performance appraisal process but also because such a distinct approach is bound to have significant implications for the collection and communication of performance information.

Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan argued that each medium, independent of the content it mediates, has its own intrinsic effects and that all media have characteristics that engage users and recipients in different and unique ways (McLuhan, 1962). For the evaluator, the format sets the parameters within which the information is collected and there are profound differences between agreeing to a performance-related statement by ticking a box and actually writing a statement about someone's performance. In his seminal work on self-report measures, Schwarz (1999) brought to light the sensitivity of respondents to subtle variations in question formats. Structural elements of closed-ended questions provide strong cues that not only influence the intended meaning of a question but also remind respondents of alternatives that they may not have considered otherwise. While Schwarz's work underscores the potency of fine variations *within* closed-ended questions, the present paper focuses mainly on variation *across* formats (i.e., quantitative and qualitative). The current paper also frames these effects within the unique context of performance appraisal. In appraisal situations, format structure has implications beyond its influence on evaluators.

The evaluative information offered by different formats also has significant implications for the *evaluatee*, the receiver of the performance information. For example, obtaining a *below average* rating on a leadership scale is certainly distinct from reading: "Bob is rarely willing to accept our input as to the best strategy to take. In the weekly meetings, he never seriously considers our suggestions about budget allocation. Most of us don't even prepare our numbers anymore". It is posed that a variation in evaluation methodology shapes, in very significant ways, how performance information is collected, presented and, very likely, interpreted.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the psychological processes related to evaluating others with narrative comments and to receiving these comments as part of a performance evaluation process that is used for individual development. This paper has the following construction: First, I provide some background as to the neglected role of narrative comments in the performance appraisal literature. Second, the implications of using narrative comments, from the point of view of the evaluator, are probed. Third, the influence of format is scrutinized from the perspective of the feedback recipient. In these sections, a series of testable propositions are offered to help structure the paper and stimulate future research. Fourth, and finally, some implications and broad research questions on the use of narrative comments in performance appraisals are considered.

2. Performance appraisal research: brief history and context

The use of rating scales in performance evaluations is deeply rooted in the history of personnel psychology (Landy & Farr, 1980). As long ago as the early 1900s, performance ratings were used in organizations and investigated by behavioral scientists (Aiken, 1996; Austin & Villanova, 1992). Today, the literature on performance evaluations focuses almost exclusively on performance ratings and it is fair to say that, in contemporary research in human resource management and industrial–organizational psychology, performance evaluation has become synonymous with performance ratings. This focus is best illustrated in the seminal book by Murphy and Cleveland (1995) on performance appraisal in which the evaluation process is labelled "rating" and evaluators "raters." That no other evaluation format other than ratings is considered or even acknowledged by these authors is telling.

An appreciation of narrative comments as an evaluation method is also absent from the most popular undergraduate human resource management texts. Paradoxically, the format of performance evaluations has long dominated research in this area. However, this line of investigation has focused exclusively on variations within rating format (e.g., Tziner & Kopelman, 2002). In fact, in performance appraisal research, the term *format* typically refers to variations in graphic rating scales (e.g., BARS, BOS) and attention on rating format has been so exclusive that researchers in the area have repeatedly called for a broader approach to the study of performance appraisal (Ilgen, Barnes-Farrell, & McKellin, 1993; Landy & Farr, 1980; Sulsky & Keown, 1998).

To be fair, the relative neglect of narrative comments is not unique to the area of performance appraisal. Survey research as a whole has also long ignored their role as an alternative or a complement to closed-ended questions and this, despite the frequent use of open-ended questions in practice (Converse, 1987; Krosnick, 1999). However, an element that may have exacerbated the neglect of comments in performance appraisal is the utilitarian aim of performance appraisal systems and the fact that they are developed, first and foremost, to support salary or bonus administration and promotion. According to a study by Bretz, Milkovich, and Read (1989) over 90% of Fortune 100 firms use performance appraisals for administrative purposes. Under an administrative paradigm, a performance appraisal system is used to justify organizational decision making, a task best handled by numbers. In addition, the dependence on quantitative approaches is reinforced by legal requirements overseeing performance appraisal (Bernardin & Beatty, 1984; Field & Holley, 1982; Malos, 1998). Taken within a broader context, the imposition of structure to support individual decision making is ubiquitous in contemporary organizations. Heath, Larrick, and Klayman (1998) labelled *cognitive repairs* those organizational practices designed to counter cognitive shortcomings of individuals and enhance human judgement and reasoning. Like the structured selection interview (Schuler, 1993), rating-based performance appraisal processes are designed for the purpose of measurement precision. A last, but rarely noted, element that favors the use of quantitative appraisal systems is that they also translate into substantial economies for raters (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). The most obvious of these economies is time or the relative efficiency with which evaluations can be completed. An expedient completion of

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