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Facing Corrections in the Workplace: The Influence of Perceived Face Threat on the Consequences of Managerial Reproaches

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ABSTRACT *The purpose of this study was to determine whether workplace reproaches differ in their level of perceived face threat and to examine the relationship between perceived face threat and a variety of outcomes. One hundred and four full-time employees completed a survey asking them to describe in detail a time they were reproached by a manager. The survey included scales measuring perceived face threat, interactional fairness, anger, communicative competence, and satisfaction with the outcome of the incident. As predicted, we found that reproaches differ from each other in degree of perceived face threat. In addition, perceived face threat was negatively correlated with interactional fairness, communicative competence, and satisfaction with the outcome of the incident, and positively correlated with anger.*
KEY WORDS: face threat, facework, fairness, politeness, reprimands, reproaches

Errors by employees are inevitable in the workplace. When such incidents occur, managers typically must confront employees. The manager's primary goal is to correct the employee and bring the employee's performance in line with the manager's expectations. Such confrontations, however, are complicated by the fact that the manager's manner of correcting the employee is constrained by concomitant secondary goals (Dillard, Segrin, & Harden, 1989; Fairhurst, Green, & Snavely, 1984). In particular, the manager must weigh the importance of correcting employee behavior against the desire to maintain a positive working relationship

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with the employee and the need to avoid threatening the employee's face. When a reproach leaves an employee feeling belittled or incompetent, the employee's face is diminished and the supervisor/subordinate relationship is likely to suffer.

In the present study, we investigate the role of perceived face threat in explaining the consequences of managerial reproaches. There are at least two prominent perspectives for examining face threat. The *structuralist* perspective defines acts *a priori* as more or less face threatening, whereas the *perceptual* perspective defines face threat from the standpoint of the communicators. Prior investigations of reproaches have assumed a structuralist view, assuming that certain linguistic forms are inherently more face-threatening than others. We agree with Brown (1995), however, who indicates that "no necessary politeness associations attach to any linguistic form in situated discourse, or rather, whatever associations attach to a form out of context may be undone in its situated use" (p. 154). Thus, structure alone does not determine face threat. Instead, the situated, pragmatic experience of communicators must also be considered. In the present investigation, we attempt to supplement the structural approach to reproaches by directly incorporating the face-relevant perceptions of the reproach recipient.

We begin by discussing the key components of face management theory, focusing on "face" and "facework," and how these concepts relate to reproaches in the workplace. Then we explain the connection between the nature and severity of a reproach message and the level of face threat an employee perceives. Finally, we assess the extent to which various consequences (such as anger and perceived fairness) are associated with the perceived face threat of a reproach.

Face Management Theory

Face

Goffman (1967) first introduced the concepts of face and facework into social science research. All humans have "face" which Goffman (1967) defines as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [or herself] by the line others assume he [or she] has taken during a particular contact" (p. 5). In other words, face is the social image one has of him/herself based on other's approval. Tracy (1990) elaborates that "[f]ace is a social phenomenon; it comes into being when one person comes into the presence of another; it is created through the communicative moves of interactants" (p. 210).

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory expanded Goffman's conceptualization of face. They distinguished between two types of face, negative and positive. Negative face is defined as "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his [or her] actions be unimpeded by others" (p. 62) (i.e., the desire for autonomy). Positive face refers to one's need to have the items/beliefs that are important to him or her also be important to or valued by others. More specifically, positive face involves the need for approval of one's "personality, attributes, accomplishments, appearance and so forth" (Metts, 1997, p. 380).

Reproaches are "face-threatening acts", which Brown and Levinson (1987) define as "those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker" (p. 65). Requests, suggestions, threats, warnings, compliments, offers, and remindings threaten negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Positive face is threatened by "expressions of disapproval, criticism,

contempt or ridicule, complaints and reprimands, accusations, insults . . . disagreements, challenges" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 66).

Criticisms, reprimands, or reproaches tend to threaten the positive and negative face of the recipient (e.g., Leichty & Applegate, 1991; Trees & Manusov, 1998). Leichty and Applegate (1991) explain that "requests or orders threaten an addressee's autonomy by imposing on the listener or by committing him or her to a future course of action" (p. 452). The directive and constraining nature of reproaches renders them threatening to negative face. At the same time, correcting an employee threatens his/her positive face by showing disapproval for the employee's accomplishments or attributes.[1]

Facework

According to Metts (1997), " 'Facework' refers to a variety of communicative devices available to interactants for preventing face loss (both their own and others'), restoring face if lost, and facilitating the maintenance of poise in the advent of disrupted interactions" (p. 374). Facework is a natural condition of interaction where persons actively manage their own faces and the faces of others in a cooperative manner (Goffman, 1967). One tries to protect his or her own face as well as the face of others, and expects that others will do the same. This creates a more predictable and comfortable context for all those involved in the interaction, because no one must suffer the embarrassment of losing face or watching someone else lose face (Goffman, 1967). When people do not follow the implicit rules of facework etiquette, they cause discomfort for others.

Goffman (1967) reveals two basic kinds of facework, corrective and preventive. Corrective facework occurs when a face-threatening incident has taken place and face needs to be restored. Corrective facework "may be *defensively* offered by the actor responsible for creating face threat, may be *protectively* offered by other people who witness the loss of face, or may be offered by the person who has lost face as he or she attempts to regain lost social identity" (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 8). Preventive facework occurs when a person avoids situations where face may be threatened, pretends that an offensive act has not taken place, and generally practices tact.

One approach to preventive facework is reflected in Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. The authors provided a hierarchical model of strategies for doing face-threatening acts (FTAs). The model shows that based on the potential level of risk to loss of face, the person doing the FTA has five options (i.e., do not do the FTA, go off record, use negative politeness, use positive politeness, go bald on record). The authors explain that the higher the potential loss to face, the more face saving the FTA should be. The first option, and the most face saving, is to *not do the FTA* at all. This would be most likely to occur when doing the FTA would pose a high risk to face loss. If one decides to do the FTA, a variety of options exist. First, one may go *off record* by using suggestion, or on record by verbally addressing the issue at hand. Going off record would involve using hints and innuendo. If one decides to go on record, he or she may do the FTA with or without redressive action. Employing redressive action means using either *negative politeness,* or *positive politeness.* According to Brown and Levinson (1987), negative politeness tries to support the person's autonomy or self-determination by apologizing for interfering or transgressing, by showing deference, or by giving

the other person an 'out' (p. 70). On the other hand, positive politeness is "claiming common ground (e.g., similar attitudes, opinions, empathy, etc.), indicating that the listener is admirable, attending to the listener's needs, exaggerating approval, including listener in activities, seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement, joking, and giving gifts" (Metts, 1997, p. 382). Doing the FTA with no redressive action, or very directly, is called going *bald on record*. For example, making a simple request or correction without additional politeness would constitute going bald on record.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies are presented as mutually exclusive and ordered linearly from most to least polite. Several authors have argued that these strategies are, in reality, neither linear nor mutually exclusive (Craig, Tracy, & Spisak, 1986; Dillard, Wilson, Tusing, & Kinney, 1997; Lim & Bowers, 1991). Dillard et al. (1997), for example, indicate "that speakers often redress face threats with complex combinations of positive and negative politeness, both sequentially and simultaneously within the same utterance" (p. 298). Assuming this is true, managers can employ both positive and negative politeness together to deliver a face-saving reproach to their employees. For example, a manager could tell an employee that his or her work tends to be exceptional (positive politeness), and that in this one instance when it was under par, the manager allows the employee to figure out for him/herself the best course of action to correct the problem (negative politeness).

Lim and Bowers (1991) explain that some degree of face threat to the employee that is implied by a reproach may be justified by the legitimacy of the authority the supervisor holds. For example, they found that when a person had a legitimate right to criticize another he or she used less facework directed at both positive and negative face. Wilson, Aleman, and Leatham (1998) found similarly that, in friendships, when one person was trying to gain compliance by attempting to enforce an unfulfilled obligation (a situation with legitimate control), he or she "displayed more concern about the primary goal of seeking compliance and less concern about secondary goals" (p. 90) (except for the desire to maintain his or her own autonomy). Thus, individuals possessing legitimate authority (i.e., managers or supervisors) may be less inclined to exhibit politeness when giving a reprimand. Bald on record reproaches may be considered normative and appropriate.

There may be instances when managers use aggressive facework, (i.e., defensive tactics designed to protect one's own face at the expense of the other's face), or what Tracy and Tracy (1998) call face attacks, to deliver severe reproaches. If an employee's violation of a rule is extremely severe or dangerous to another, or if the manager wants emphatically to drive home a point, the manager might feel it is more appropriate to deliver a severe reproach at the expense of the employee's face. As well, if the employee's actions make the manager look bad, thereby threatening the manager's face, the manager may get defensive.

Problematic Events and Reproaches

Reproachers go through the process of what Morris (1988) calls "fault finding" to establish an event as problematic.[2] Following prior conceptualizations (e.g., Cupach, 1994; Morris & Coursey, 1989; Schönbach & Kleibaumhüter, 1990), a *problematic event* in the workplace occurs when an individual intentionally or unintentionally violates the expectations of the company or of the manager. The

event "can be either an acted offense, or the omission of an obligation" (Schönbach & Kleibaumhüter, 1990, p. 229). Not all violations necessarily result in a reproach. In some cases, a reproach may be superfluous, as when an employee offers an apology and self-correction, or when the infraction is so minor as to render a reproach unnecessary (Cupach, 1994).

Problematic events at work include, but are not limited to, the following: poor performance (which may include performance errors, too much time on a project, a missed deadline, or performance inferior to set standards or other employees), questionable decisions, tardiness to work or meetings, regular absence from work, and disruptive behavior (Braaten, Cody, & DeTienne, 1993; Cody & Braaten, 1992; Mitchell & Wood, 1980). Prior reproach researchers (Braaten et al., 1993; McLaughlin, Cody, & O'Hair, 1983; Morris, Gaveras, Baker, & Coursey, 1990; Schönbach, 1990; Schönbach & Kleibaumhüter, 1990) have developed typologies that include reproaches ranging from mild to severe. Reproaches that are milder include behaviors such as asking neutral questions, hinting, using innuendo, and delivering the reproach politely. Severe reproaches might include behaviors such as taking formal action, attacking the employee's self-esteem or sense of control, and rebuking the employee. The relative severity of reproaches corresponds to Cody and McLaughlin's (1985) mitigation-aggravation continuum, a "continuum of 'politeness,' or 'preference' " (Cody & Braaten, 1992, p. 226). At the mitigation end of the continuum, reproaches are polite, sensitive to feelings, tactful, and generally face saving, while at the aggravation end, reproaches tend to be offensive, aggressive, impolite, and generally face threatening.

One example of how reproaches differ in severity is provided in Braaten et al.'s (1993) reproach taxonomy. Braaten et al. (1993) identified four possible types of reproaches for problematic events including, implicit reproaches, polite reproaches, questions that were neither polite nor rude, and rebukes. Implicit reproaches occur when the person who caused the problematic event "was not explicitly asked to explain a behavior but understood that an explanation was in order" (Braaten et al., 1993, p. 229). A polite reproach takes into account the employee's feelings and self-esteem. The third option, direct requests, consists of asking a question that was neither rude nor polite. Finally, some managers rebuke their employees, which means that they reproach them "in a rude, hostile, aggravating, or unfriendly manner" (Braaten et al., 1993, p. 229). Applying Cody and McLaughlin's (1985) mitigation-aggravation continuum to Braaten et al.'s (1993) typology, reproaches range from mitigating (i.e., implicit reproaches) to aggravating (i.e., rebukes).

Hypotheses

Perceived Face Threat

Prior research (e.g., Braaten et al., 1993; McLaughlin et al., 1983) distinguishes the relative severity of reproaches according to the *theoretical* or presumed degree of face threat for the employee associated with the reproach. However, research has yet to assess empirically the *perceived level of face threat* in reproaches. Previous studies have classified reproaches according to objective features of the message (i.e., a structuralist approach), while the current study examines the perception of face threat from the *recipient's* point of view (i.e., a perceptual approach). This study will directly test the level of the employee's *perceived face*

threat present in reproaches and determine whether reproach types differ in the level of perceived face threat. Reproach messages will be coded into categories reflecting degree of face saving/face threat, based on elements identified in the reproach message. These categories should be able to be ordered and differentiated in terms of perceived face threat. Based on previous research on reproaches, the first hypothesis predicts that:

H1: Reproach types differ significantly from each other in their degree of perceived face threat.

Consequences of Reproaches

Several authors indicate that aggravating forms of reproaches (Braaten et al., 1993; Cody & Braaten, 1992; Cody & McLaughlin, 1985; Cupach, 1994; McLaughlin et al., 1983; Schönbach & Kleibaumhüter, 1990) lead to aggravating forms of accounts, thereby intensifying an already uncomfortable situation. (Accounts are explanations given by offenders for untoward behavior.) Cody and McLaughlin (1985), for example, found consistently across three studies "that aggravating forms of reproaches lead to aggravating accounts and that aggravating reproach forms rarely lead to mitigating accounts" (p. 66). Similarly, Schönbach and Kleibaumhüter (1990) reported that more severe reproaches were associated with more defensive accounts. A severe "reproach apparently not only strengthens an actor's tendency to refute the opponent's charge or justify his or her behavior during the failure event, but also markedly weakens the actor's readiness to offer some concessions" (p. 241). Based upon the level of face threat in the reproach, predictions may be made about consequences of different reproaches. Some of the consequences associated with reproach severity may include perceived interactional fairness of the supervisor, anger on the part of the employee, employee perception of the supervisor's communicative competence, and satisfaction with the outcome of the incident.

Perceived Interactional Fairness. Managerial effectiveness depends, in part, on fostering impressions of fairness (e.g., Greenberg, Bies, & Eskew, 1991). Some prior researchers, for example, have examined the importance of fairness in evaluating accounts. For instance, Bies (1987a) examined how people evaluate the fairness of managerial decision-makers (who might find themselves in situations similar to managerial reproachers due to the face-threatening nature of both situations, and the manager's legitimate power involved in both). He found that the opportunity for voice, decision-maker justification, and the sincerity used in delivering the justification, all of which could be seen as more face saving for the employee, are positively correlated with a person's appraisal of procedural fairness. Similarly, Bies and Shapiro (1987) found that when a managerial decision-maker provided an adequate account, employees perceived greater interactional and procedural fairness. It seems reasonable to infer that the manner in which a manager reproaches an employee may also lead to an appraisal of fairness or unfairness.

Tata (1996) and Bies, Shapiro, and Cummings (1988) examined how managers' accounts for denying employee requests can affect perceived fairness. Situations in which managers must deny employee requests are similar to reproach situations because in both cases the employee's face is threatened. Tata (1996) found that employees whose managers used justifications when denying employee requests

"evaluated the manager's action as fairer than those provided with no social accounts" (p. 180). The results of Bies et al.'s (1988) study indicated that the perceived adequacy and sincerity of the manager's account were negatively related to perceived procedural injustice.

The studies just reviewed report findings regarding both procedural and interactional fairness. Procedural justice/fairness is defined by Folger and Greenberg (1985) as "the perceived fairness of the procedures used in making decisions" (p. 143). Interactional fairness is defined as the "quality of interpersonal treatment they [the employees] receive during the implementation of a procedure" (Bies, 1987b, p. 292; see also Bies & Moag, 1986; Bies & Shapiro, 1987; Moorman, 1991; Tyler & Bies, 1990). Bies and Moag (1986) contend that "[t]he inclusion of interactional matters such as communication might also explain why people feel unfairly treated even though they would characterize the decision making procedures and the outcome to be fair" (p. 46). Because the present study focuses on the face threat involved in reproaches, i.e., the actual communication that takes place between the manager and the employee, the most logical aspect of organizational fairness to evaluate is interactional fairness. Based upon these previously mentioned studies, less face-threatening moves have been shown to lead to perceptions of greater fairness, consequently, hypothesis two predicts:

H2: There will be a negative correlation between the degree of perceived face threat in supervisors' reproaches and employees' perceptions of interactional fairness of the reproaching supervisor.

Anger. Another factor potentially associated with perceived level of face threat in the reproach is an employee's anger. As indicated previously, severe or aggravating reproaches lead to aggravating, defensive accounts and/or evaluations (Braaten et al., 1993; Cody & McLaughlin, 1985; Schönbach & Kleibaumhüter, 1990). Such defensiveness can co-occur with and/or indicate anger on the part of the employee. For instance, Cody and Braaten (1992) explain that "Severe forms of reproach that involve a personal attack, which derogates the self concept, elicit defensive reactions, result in negative evaluations, and cause negative interpersonal and emotional consequences" (p. 242). More specifically, Braaten et al. (1993) studied how aggravating reproaches are related to emotional responses from the reproached person. They found that aggravating forms of reproach were positively correlated with anger.

Research on accounts also supports the connection between face-threatening messages and anger. For instance, Bies et al. (1988) showed that when managers give an adequate, sincere account for refusals of employees' requests (for instance, denying a request for a salary increase), the employee is less likely to feel angry. Adequate and sincere accounts are likely to be more face-preserving for employees. In addition, Tata (1996) and Tata and Rhodes (1996) found that justifications (a moderately face-saving response to a face-threatening situation) "indirectly decreased anger . . . through the mediating influence of perceptions of fairness" (Tata, 1996, p. 181). Similarly, emotion researchers (Mikula, Scherer, & Athenstaedt, 1998; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987) indicate that perceptions of fairness are negatively linked to anger. In other words, the level of face threat the manager uses when reprimanding an employee is likely to affect the employee's perception of fairness, which in turn will affect the level of anger the

employee feels. Specifically, more face threat leads to perceived unfairness, which leads to anger.

The findings of the studies presented here are based upon theoretically determined reproach types. They have not employed a measure to empirically test the message recipient's perception of the level of severity (face threat) in the reproach. Thus, hypothesis three predicts:

H3: There will be a positive correlation between the degree of perceived face threat in supervisors' reproaches and employees' level of anger.

Communicative Competence. Much of the activity that takes place in organizations involves communication, highlighting the need for organizational members to be competent communicators. Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) define communicative competence as "the ability to adapt messages appropriately to the interaction context" (p. 64). Monge, Bachman, Dillard, and Eisenberg (1982) explain that "a communicator competence construct, especially one developed for use in the workplace, ought to focus on observable communication behaviors and omit or minimize social and interpersonal factors" (p. 507). Based on this assumption, Monge and colleagues (1982) created a scale to measure supervisors' and subordinates' communicator competence in the workplace. The measure focuses primarily on encoding and decoding behaviors, which are key to competent workplace communication. Examples of some encoding behaviors are being able to "express one's ideas clearly, having a good command of the language, and being easy to understand" (Monge et al., 1982, p. 508), while decoding behaviors emphasize attentiveness, listening, and responding (Monge et al., 1982).

Wellmon (1988) conducted a qualitative study to discover the types of behaviors that working individuals found to be important to the concept of communicative competence in the organization. She created categories based upon responses to interview questions. Several of the categories that emerged parallel the encoding and decoding behaviors offered by Monge et al. (1982). For instance, respondents found characteristics such as listening well, having a friendly, personable manner (which included responses regarding sensitivity, rationality, and warmth), understanding human nature, good interaction skills, and having an effective verbal style, are seen as important to competent communication. Some of these characteristics reflect the fact that the ability to maintain or save face is one important component of communicative competence (Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Cupach & Metts, 1994; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989; Weinstein, 1969; Wiemann, 1977). Communicating clearly and articulately reflects positively on a manager's perceived effectiveness. Showing attentiveness, responsiveness, rationality, and warmth serve to support the employee's positive face. When managers' messages are clear and hearer-sensitive, they support the employee's negative face by not placing undue communicative constraints on the listener.

Managers who deliver face-threatening reproaches may be viewed as less competent communicators, as the harsh reproach may cause employees to attribute the poor delivery to negative traits of the supervisor. Conversely, if a supervisor does not have a good command of the language, does not listen well, or does not tend to say the right thing at the right time, he or she may be more likely to deliver reproaches that are more face threatening. Although causality is unclear in these situations, face-threatening reproaches are likely to be associated with

perceptions of poor communicative competence. Consequently, the following is hypothesized:

H4: There will be a negative correlation between the degree of perceived face threat in supervisors' reproaches and employees' perceptions of communicative competence of the reproaching supervisor.

Satisfaction With Incident Outcome. Braaten et al. (1993) indicate that severe reproaches have a negative impact on emotional outcomes. The authors found that the severity of reproach was positively correlated with dissatisfaction with the outcome, anger, stress, and a desire to complain about the incident. The present study attempts to replicate Braaten et al.'s (1993) finding regarding the association between reproach severity and dissatisfaction from a perceptual perspective rather than the structural perspective used by Braaten et al. (1993). Anger and stress, both negative feelings, may be indicative of the individual's level of dissatisfaction with the outcome of the reproach. In addition, the likelihood of employee complaints should increase with dissatisfaction about the outcome of the reproach. It is also likely that more face-threatening reproaches, even those that are technically warranted, are associated with dissatisfaction due to the disappointment the employee experiences. This disappointment and dissatisfaction may arise from heightened feelings of inadequacy based upon the harshness of the reproach. Thus, the final hypothesis predicts:

H5: There will be a negative correlation between the degree of perceived face threat in supervisors' reproaches and employees' satisfaction with the outcome of the incident.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 104 individuals (70 females, 31 males, and 3 who did not indicate sex) who currently work full-time or have worked full-time in the last twelve months. The average age of the respondents was 37.3 years (ranging from 18 to 71). The majority of the respondents were well educated, as 88.1% had at least some college education (28.7% specified some college education, 20.8% were college graduates, 12.9% had some graduate work, and 25.7% had a Master's, Ph.D., or other advanced degree). Respondents were employed in a variety of professions including insurance, law, education (elementary, secondary, and advanced), medicine, business, and technology. They represented various levels within the organizations including, entry-level clerical employees, middle-level employees, managers, and vice-presidents. Individuals currently worked an average of 42.7 hours per week, ranging from 0 (someone who worked within the last 12 months, but does not work currently) to 80. Respondents worked for their current employer an average of 8.5 years (ranging from 2 weeks to 33 years), in their current position an average of 3.8 years (ranging from 2 weeks to 18 years), and for their current supervisor an average of 2.4 years (ranging from 2 weeks to 12 years).

Data Collection

Data for this study were obtained through responses to a written survey. Five hundred thirty-three surveys were distributed to students in law school night classes, MBA night and weekend classes, an undergraduate communication class, and to a variety of working individuals in businesses, schools, and a professional association. For two of the MBA classes, the undergraduate communication course, and for the professional association, one of the researchers went to the class/association, provided information about the nature of the study to the potential participants, and distributed the surveys. At the law school, the elementary school, and in one of the MBA classes, a contact person disseminated surveys. At one of the businesses, the researchers gave the surveys to a contact person who put them in employees' mailboxes with a cover letter from the company indicating company approval of employee participation. Similarly, at the elementary school, the contact person attached a letter to the survey packet and inserted the surveys in employees' mailboxes. The remainder of the surveys was distributed via network sampling. All surveys included a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope and instructions for completion. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous.

The first section of the survey asked participants to consider a recent time when they were verbally reproached by their supervisor and then to describe the reproach (and their response to the reproach) in as much detail as possible. Additional questions helped to situate the reproach.[3] Section one also asked respondents to rate their level of satisfaction with the outcome of the reproach incident. Sections two through four of the survey contained measures of perceived face threat, interactional fairness, anger, and communicative competence (described below). The final section of the survey contained questions soliciting demographic information and an evaluation of the individual's relationship with his or her supervisor.

Variables/Measures

Reproach Type. Type of reproach was developed inductively, applying the concepts of face theory (specifically face-saving and face-threatening maneuvers) to the reproaches. One of the researchers, acting as a coder, analyzed what Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1996) call the context unit, which is defined as "the largest body of content that may be examined when characterizing a recording unit" (p. 327). In this instance, one researcher read responses to the two open-ended questions. The questions asked the respondent to describe in detail (1) a time he or she had been reproached and (2) the account given to the reproacher. The responses to these two questions were combined and used to code the type of reproach. Using information from both questions provided more comprehensive data about the incident, allowing a clearer picture of the event. For example, if in describing his or her *account* to the manager, an employee indicated that the manager subsequently apologized for delivering a harsh reproach, this information was useful in qualifying the initial description of the reproach.

The initial analysis involved perusing the open-ended responses for each protocol (91 of the 104 participants completed the open-ended questions). The researcher took notes on how face theory was implicated in each reproach. The

notes for the responses were compared and contrasted by examining similarities and differences of features that demonstrate face saving or face threat. Based upon the initial analysis, four categories emerged, and a coding scheme was established to distinguish among "Polite," "Bald on Record," "Aggravating," and "Very Aggravating" reproaches. The researcher and an independent coder coded 74% of the reproaches,[4] and based upon their classifications the coding scheme was refined. Disagreements were resolved by discussion. This coding and the discussions served to train the researcher and the independent coder for the coding to be used to test reliability. To establish intercoder reliability, the two coders independently classified the remaining 26% of the protocols not used to develop and refine the coding scheme. Agreement between the coders was 96%. Scott's pi was .94.

The "polite" category included reproaches where the manager went significantly out of his or her way to soften the reproach. Examples included showing respect, being courteous and positive, acting "kindly," correcting the employee and asking for compliance in a pleading manner, and using a very nice tone. "Bald on record" included straightforward corrections, reprimands, or reproaches. The responses focused on information sharing/clarification, mild tone, pleasant demeanor, and fairness (i.e., the reprimand was fair or warranted). Several responses indicated situations where managers asked employees what took place and allowed employees to share their version of the incident that led to the reproach.

To be categorized as "aggravating," the manager did something in addition to the reproach that led the employee to feel negatively. In such cases, participants described the reproacher's behavior as "negative," "sharp," "stern," "condescending," "accusatory," "aggressive," or "sarcastic." Other characteristics of "aggravating" reproaches embedded in participants descriptions included yelling at the employee, constraining the employee's choices, or delivering the reproach in public. Unjustified, unfair, inaccurate, unwarranted, or overboard reproaches were categorized as "aggravating." Reproaches were coded as "very aggravating" when official action was threatened or taken, when employee's choices were severely constrained (forced to take a few days off), when the tone was very harsh, and when several aggravating actions co-occurred. If a reproach would have been classified as "very aggravating," but the reproacher susequently apologized, then the reproach was categorized as "aggravating."

Perceived Face Threat. The employees' appraisal of the level of face threat was measured with an 18-item scale developed for this study. Using a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 7 = Strongly Agree), employees rated their level of agreement with the statements provided. Some sample items include: "My supervisor's actions questioned my work competence," "My supervisor's actions made me feel disliked," and "My supervisor's actions allowed me to determine appropriate solutions" (reverse scored). Items were constructed and refined based upon conceptualizations in the literature regarding threats to positive and negative face. Principal components analysis suggested unidimensionality of the items. Scale reliability was $\alpha = .94$.

Perceived Interactional Fairness. Perceived interactional fairness was measured with a ten-item scale using five items each from scales developed by Bies and Shapiro (1987) and by Moorman (1991).[5] Respondents rated their perceptions

of fairness on a scale of 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much so). Sample statements included: "My supervisor treated me fairly during the reprimand," "My supervisor considered my viewpoint," and "My supervisor treated me with kindness and consideration." Reliability for the combined scales was $\alpha = .95$.

Anger. Bies et al. (1988) created a scale to measure anger, which involved having respondents rate how angry, resentful, outraged, and upset they felt. The wording of this scale was adapted for use in this study to reflect the level of anger experienced after a manager's reproach. Participants responded to the four items using a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much so). Sample items include: "After being reprimanded by my supervisor, I felt angry," "After being reprimanded by my supervisor, I felt outraged." Reliability was $\alpha = .94$.

Communicative Competence. Monge et al. (1982) provide a measure for communicative competence in the workplace. This measure, which focuses specifically on encoding and decoding behaviors, was chosen over the many other measures of interpersonal and communicative competence (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989) because it focuses on the communication aspects of competence and was created specifically for the workplace. The scale has 12 items. Respondents rate their level of agreement with statements such as "My supervisor has a good command of the language," and "My supervisor can deal with others effectively" on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 7 = Strongly Agree).[6] Reliability for this scale was $\alpha = .91$.

Satisfaction With Incident Outcome. The measure for satisfaction with the outcome of the incident was created for this study and consisted of three items that seemed to possess face validity. Participants were asked to respond to the following statements: "I was satisfied with the outcome of the reprimand," "The resolution of the event was satisfactory," and "I felt unhappy about the outcome of the reprimand" (reverse scored). Respondents rated their agreement with these statements on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 7 = Strongly Agree). Reliability was $\alpha = .89$. The third item was dropped to increase α to .95.

Results

The significance level for statistical tests was $p < .05$ (one-tailed tests for correlations). Hypothesis 1 predicted that reproach types would significantly differ from each other in their degree of perceived face threat. To test this hypothesis, mean levels of perceived face threat were compared across groups representing the four reproach categories. ANOVA indicated support for the hypothesis, $F(3, 87) = 53.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .65$. "Polite reproaches" were perceived as less face threatening than "bald on record" reproaches, which, in turn were perceived as less face threatening than "aggravating" reproaches, which were perceived as less face threatening than "very aggravating" reproaches (see Table 1 for mean scores). LSD post hoc analysis indicated that the mean difference between categories was significant for all categories except "polite" and "bald on record" ($p = .14$).[7]

Hypotheses 2, 4, and 5 predicted that there would be a negative correlation

TABLE 1
Mean Level of Perceived Face Threat for Reproach Types

Reproach Type	Perceived Face Threat
Polite	1.64_a
Bald on Record	2.26_a
Aggravating	4.12_b
Very Aggravating	5.31_c

Note: Higher means indicate greater degrees of perceived face threat. Means with uncommon subscripts are significantly different at the $p < .05$ level.

between the degree of perceived face threat in the reproach and the employee's perception of the supervisor's interactional fairness, the employee's perception of the supervisor's communicative competence, and the employee's satisfaction with the outcome of the incident. Hypothesis 3 predicted a positive correlation between the degree of perceived face threat in the reproach and the employee's level of anger. Pearson correlations (reported in Table 2) showed strong support for hypotheses 2 through 5. Perceived face threat accounted for an average of 63% of the variance in the dependent variables.

Discussion

Implications for Face Management Theory

Hypothesis 1, which predicted that reproach types would differ in their level of perceived face threat was supported. While prior research has examined face-threatening reproaches based on an analysis of the message itself (Braaten et al., 1993; McLaughlin et al., 1983; Schönbach & Kleibaumhüter, 1990), no studies have empirically established a connection between the reproach message and the employee's perceived face threat. The current study lends support to the claim that reproaches vary in severity based on recipients' interpretations of contextualized utterances. Incorporating recipient perceptions in the study of reproaches enhances empirical support for face theory by evidencing the representational validity of perceived face threat. Consistent with face theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967; Lim & Bowers, 1991), our perceptual data verify that reproaches questioning an individual's competence, showing contempt, or interfering with the individual's autonomy are perceived by employees to be more face threatening than interactions showing respect, liking, or confidence in abilities.

Although hypothesis 1 was supported, "polite" and "bald on record" reproaches did not differ significantly from one another. This finding is not all that

TABLE 2
Correlations Between Perceived Face Threat and Dependent Variables

Dependent Variable	r	r^2
Interactional Fairness	−.87*	.76
Anger	.82*	.67
Communicative Competence	−.66*	.44
Satisfaction with Outcome	−.81*	.66

*$p < .01$, one-tailed.

surprising. It may, in part, be due to the small number of reproaches categorized as "polite" (N = 6). In addition, polite reproaches are not likely to reduce substantially the face threat of a warranted correction because they still constitute face-threatening acts, unless the reproach is so polite that it merely hints or completely goes off record. The supervisor's legitimate authority may diminish the otherwise face-threatening nature of a "bald on record" reproach, because the supervisor and subordinate roles carry with them certain face expectations grounded in status differences (e.g., Holtgraves, 1986). More specifically, Lim (1994) notes that supervisors "are endowed with more legitimacy to ignore subordinates' face-wants, and subordinates generally believe that it is their virtue not to claim too much face" (p. 219). Therefore, legitimate and fair bald on record reproaches may not be much more face threatening than overtly polite reproaches. It is also possible that polite and bald on record reproaches tend to be viewed simply by recipients as constructive feedback. Such reproaches may actually support the negative face of employees by empowering them to perform more effectively and autonomously in the future.

The strong support for hypotheses 2 through 5 highlights the usefulness of perceived face threat in predicting a variety of outcomes. There was a remarkably high correlation between degree of perceived face threat and the employee's perception of the supervisor's interactional fairness. In our sample (which may have undersampled polite reproaches), face-threatening reproaches tend to be unfair in nature—at least in the employee's eyes. This was supported by our qualitative data. For instance, many of the reproaches classified as "aggravating" or "very aggravating" exhibited distinct perceptions of unfairness. Respondents used words such as "unjustified," "unfair," "inaccurate," "unwarranted," and "overboard" to highlight the unfairness of the reproach. It follows, then, that the unjust nature of the reproach contributed to the employee perceiving it as face threatening. Further, reproaches that seek to constrain an employee's actions (autonomy) and/or diminish the employee's feelings of competence or acceptance may be seen as crossing the line dividing legitimate and unfair correction.

Despite the strong correlation between perceived face threat and fairness, they are distinct concepts. It is certainly possible for a fair reproach to be seen as face threatening and for an unfair reproach to exhibit minimal face threat. Supplementary analyses revealed that the two concepts clearly overlap, yet they each make unique contributions in predicting other variables, such as anger, outcome satisfaction, or communicative competence. For example, when perceived face threat is controlled for, fairness still significantly predicts anger ($pr = -.50$, $p < .001$), albeit to a lesser degree. Similarly, when fairness is controlled for, perceived face threat still significantly predicts anger ($pr = .29$, $p < .005$).

The finding that greater amounts of perceived face threat in a reproach lead to employee anger indicates that managers alienate and anger their employees when managers do not take their employees' face needs into account. This finding extends the findings of Braaten et al. (1993), Cody and McLaughlin (1985), and Schönbach and Kleibaumhüter (1990), which show severe reproaches lead to anger and defensive accounts/evaluations. The present study verifies these prior findings by demonstrating that the theoretical severity of reproaches is manifested in employees' appraisals of face threat.

Face-threatening reproaches are also associated with diminished perceptions of the manager's communicative competence. Problematic episodes that call for a

reproach present managers with a competence dilemma. To be seen as competent, managers must perform both effectively and appropriately, and these criteria may be at odds with one another. To be effective, the manager must correct an employee rather than allow errant behavior to go unchallenged. To privilege effectiveness over appropriateness, the manager risks achieving correction at the expense of the employee's face. Effective correction without appropriateness likely leads to a defensive employee reaction and a decline in the relationship between the manager and the employee. On the other hand, to show appropriateness, the manager must save the face of the corrected employee. But to lavish tact and approbation on the employee may water down the correction to the point of eroding its effectiveness. In other words, if the reproach is excessively appropriate and polite, then the employee may feel validated but not "get the point" of the correction. Consequently, the manager's expectations continue to be violated. Managers must, therefore, juggle the delicate dialectical tension between effectiveness and appropriateness (e.g., Spitzberg, 1993; Spitzberg, Canary, & Cupach, 1994). By implication, competent managers must be sensitive to the intricate interplay between positive and negative face, and they should seek to balance their own face needs with those of their employees. They should offer reproaches in such a way as to appear competent while allowing the recipient to feel autonomous and competent as well.

Implications for Managers

The strong correlations between perceived face threat and the negative consequences mentioned above highlight the importance of using facework strategies during potentially face-threatening interactions. Goffman (1967) indicates that facework is usually a cooperative process that acts to reduce discomfort for all parties. The findings provided here emphasize that practicing aggressive facework can cause employees extreme discomfort, which carries over into their general attitudes about their supervisors and the supervisor/subordinate relationship. Specifically, more face-threatening reproaches are associated with greater perceptions of managerial unfairness, lower perceptions of managerial communication competence, less satisfaction with incident outcome, and more anger. In other words, when a manager protects his/her own face at the expense of the employee's, it causes the employee to evaluate the situation and the manager more negatively. For instance, if employees perceive their supervisor to be unfair due to a severely delivered reproach, it may affect their morale, in turn reducing productivity and job satisfaction.

In addition, the anger and perception of greater unfairness associated with greater perceived face threat may influence the employee's attitude regarding his/her job and the workplace in general, causing the employee to complain to others and potentially spread discontent. In addition, greater perceptions of unfairness may cause the employee to distrust the manager and question his/her authority, leading the supervisor-subordinate relationship into a negatively spiraling cycle.

Perceptions of the supervisor's communicative competence are also significantly lower when managers deliver reproaches that are perceived to be more face threatening. Employees who feel their managers do not communicate competently may be less likely to approach the supervisor to discuss work-related problems.

This disadvantages the supervisor because he or she may not find out about problems or issues until they have become quite large. It also disadvantages employees, as they may become frustrated with the need to keep ideas and concerns to themselves.

The combination of the outcomes found to be associated with greater perceived face threat raises concerns regarding several other workplace issues such as employee retention, employee attendance, and work quality. For instance, employees who are reproached severely and experience the negative outcomes found in the current study would be more likely to search for employment that is more satisfactory, reducing employee retention. Employee attendance may be affected in much the same way. When employees are unhappy with their workplace circumstances, they are more likely to miss work, which is costly to managers, both financially and in terms of employee morale. In addition, dissatisfaction with feedback can depress employee motivation (Ringer, Balkin, & Boss, 1993), which tends to diminish work quality.

Fortunately, managers have methods they can use to avoid or reduce these problems. For instance, trade journals typically encourage managers to offer constructive feedback (Burley-Allen, 1995; Smith, 1987), to show respect for their employees (Burley-Allen, 1995), to provide feedback that is appropriate to the employee's needs (Smith, 1987), and to deliver reprimands in private (Mello, 1995). In the current study, less face-threatening reproaches were regarded as fair, constructive, private, supportive of identity and relational needs, and respectful. Therefore, managers who find it necessary to reproach an employee can improve the situation by making sure that they conduct the reproach privately, that the reproach is warranted and commensurate with the violation, and that they are courteous, positive, and informative. Where possible, managers should correct employees in a straightforward manner that validates the employee's overall competence, and allows the employee to rectify problems autonomously. Our data also suggest that managers should avoid inflammatory behaviors that pose undue face threat to employees, such as showing anger, hostility, disdain, disrespect, or sarcasm during a reproach.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the encouraging findings presented here, the study contains several limitations. First, the response rate was quite low (19.9%). One possible consequence is that the sample obtained may not represent the larger universe of reproaches typically delivered by managers. It is possible that our sample of reproaches overrepresents corrections that are seen as particularly severe.[8] A larger sample is needed to more adequately capture reproaches that are relatively mundane and polite. In addition, although the sample came from a wide variety of professions (insurance, medicine, education, law, etc.), and from many different positions within the organizations (from clerical on up to senior level management), most participants were employed in professional settings. The types of reprimands that occur in these settings may differ from the types of reprimands that would take place in other work settings, such as a manufacturing plant or a restaurant. Thus, the generalizability of the findings presented here needs to be addressed with additional research.

Second, 58.7% of the respondents referenced an event that took place over six

months ago. Requiring respondents to recall a past event may be problematic in that the participants may not remember exactly what happened during the incident. Participants may have had a difficult time remembering mild reproaches as very few reproaches were classified as "Polite." Mild reproaches may generally be more difficult to remember because they would not tend to be as traumatic or salient as severe reproaches, particularly as the time since the event increases. Indeed, memory biases may have led participants to exaggerate, intentionally or unintentionally, the direct and confrontational nature of some reproaches. Moreover, respondents might feel differently about the reprimand now than they did at the time it occurred.

A logical extension of our research would be to examine the responses that employees give to their supervisors' reproaches. These accounts could then be classified according to the level of perceived face threat in the reproach, asking the question: What types of accounts do employees give in response to reproaches that are perceived to be more or less face threatening? Although different types of accounts have been associated with different reproach types, the *perceived* face threat in the reproach has not been empirically tied to the subsequent account.

It also would be interesting to examine the manager's level of perceived face threat associated with employee responses to a reproach. One way to do this might entail asking managers to describe a time that they reproached an employee and how the employee responded, having them evaluate the level of perceived face threat in the employee account. The accounts could then be coded into categories of more to less face threat, as was done with the reproaches in this study.

The current study measures the perceived face threat present in different types of reproaches, however it does not account for individual differences in face needs. It seems reasonable to assume that some individuals have a higher need for politeness than do others (e.g., Cupach & Metts, 1994). Further, based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) conceptualizations of positive and negative face, it would be interesting to parse out separate positive (liking and competence) and negative (autonomy) face needs. While some individuals may have a high positive face need, their negative face need may be quite low (or vice versa). Others might be high or low in both needs. Thus, it would be interesting to create a tool to measure dispositional positive and negative face needs. Such a measure could begin to explain what personal factors influence the tendency to be hypersensitive to criticism.

Conclusion

It is clear that correcting employees is an important part of a supervisor's job. Face theory provides an excellent framework for explaining why different ways of reproaching can maintain or diminish the quality of relationships between managers and their employees. Although severe reproaches are sometimes necessary, results from the present study provide theoretical and empirical support that it is usually in the best interests of the manager and the employee for the reproach to be delivered in a manner that saves face for the employee.

Endnotes

1. Although not addressed empirically in this study, reproaches also can threaten the manager's face. The reproach may run contrary to the manager's negative face needs by requiring him or her to take time

out of the day to deal with an unpleasant situation. At the same time, reproaching an employee can threaten the manager's positive face because the nature of making corrections can distance the manager from the employee and cause the manager to feel less likable.

2. For the situation that leads to a reproach, researchers have employed terms such as problematic event (Morris & Coursey, 1989), failure event (Schönbach & Kleibaumhüter, 1990), and social predicament (Cupach, 1994). This study will employ the term "problematic event," as the word "failure" in "failure event" seems too severe, and a social predicament has a more interpersonal connotation.

3. Responses to questions that situated the reproach indicated that the largest number of respondents reported that the reproach took place more than a year ago (35.6%), while 6.7% indicated that it took place within the past week, 11.5% within the last month, 23.1% within the past six months, and 23.1% more than six months ago, but less than a year ago. Most individuals were reprimanded in their supervisor's office/cubicle (46.2%). The remainder were reproached in their own office/cubicle (12.5%), in a conference or meeting room (17.3%), in the hallway (3.8%), or in some "other" place (20.2%). When respondents specified "other" places, they included a nurse's station, a classroom, an administrative workroom, on the phone, an upper management office, a reception desk, and over e-mail.

4. This percentage is based upon the number of protocols needed to exhaust all modifications to the coding scheme.

5. One of Moorman's (1991) original questions was omitted from this study, as the content was geared specifically toward feedback about decision-making. Wording for all statements was altered from the original form, changing "you" and "your" to "my" and "me." For example, when the original statement read "Your supervisor considered your viewpoint," it was changed to "My supervisor considered my viewpoint." Finally, Moorman (1991) did not indicate the type of scaling used in his study, so the current study employed the same scaling used for the Bies and Shapiro (1987) scale.

6. The format of the scale responses has been adapted from its original version to follow the format for some of the other scales in this survey, however the wording of the statements is identical to that of Monge et al.'s.

7. Post hoc comparisons also were computed using the Games-Howell procedure, which is appropriate for unequal N's, particularly when it cannot be assumed that variances are equal (Toothaker, 1993). Results paralleled those of the LSD analysis, although the mean difference between the first and second categories approached significance ($p = .052$).

8. Although we may not have captured all types of reproaches in our sample, we could argue that a restriction in range of severity of reproaches yields a conservative test of our hypotheses, thus bolstering confidence in our findings.

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