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### **How to cite this manuscript**

If you make reference to this version of the manuscript, use the following information:

Culbertson, S. S., Henning, J. B., & Payne, S. C. (2013). Performance appraisal satisfaction: The role of feedback and goal orientation. Retrieved from <http://krex.ksu.edu>

### **Published Version Information**

**Citation:** Culbertson, S. S., Henning, J. B., & Payne, S. C. (2013). Performance appraisal satisfaction: The role of feedback and goal orientation. *Journal of Personnel Psychology*, 12(4), 189-195.

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**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):** doi:10.1027/1866-5888/a000096

**Publisher's Link:** <http://www.psycontent.com/content/u0854v34hr040208/>

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**Performance Appraisal Satisfaction:  
The Role of Feedback and Goal Orientation**

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*Authors' Note.*

The authors wish to thank Margaret Horner and Kelleen Stine-Cheyne for their assistance with data collection. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 24th annual conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, New Orleans, LA, April 2009.

### **Abstract**

Employee satisfaction with performance appraisal (PA) plays a large role in the perceived effectiveness of PA. We examined the joint effects of feedback sign (positive or negative) and three goal orientation dimensions (learning, performance-prove, performance-avoid) on PA satisfaction. Results revealed the negative relationship between negative feedback and PA satisfaction was stronger for those higher in performance-prove (PPGO), performance-avoid, and learning goal orientation. Additionally, the relationship between positive feedback and PA satisfaction was stronger for individuals low on PPGO and weaker for individuals high on PPGO. Implications for enhancing PA reactions are discussed.

Keywords: performance appraisal, goal orientation, feedback sign, satisfaction

### **Performance Appraisal Satisfaction: The Role of Feedback and Goal Orientation**

Employee reactions to performance appraisals (PAs) may be better indicators of long-term effectiveness and viability of appraisal systems than psychometric indices (Dipboye & de Pontbriand, 1981). Furthermore, employee acceptance of and satisfaction with PA systems is essential for their optimal effectiveness (Levy & Williams, 2004; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). Thus, researchers have examined factors that influence PA reactions, including characteristics of the feedback (e.g., feedback type, Steele-Johnson, Perlow, & Pieper, 1993; feedback sign; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979) and the feedback recipient (e.g., negative affectivity, Lam, Yik, & Schaubroeck, 2002). Few researchers, however, have examined how feedback characteristics interact with individual differences to determine PA reactions. Thus, we examine the influence of feedback sign (positive vs. negative) and goal orientation (Dweck, 1986) on one particular reaction: PA satisfaction.

PA satisfaction, or the extent to which the appraisal meets employee needs and expectations, is considered to be "one of the most consequential of the reactions to appraisal feedback" (Jawahar, 2006, p. 14). Furthermore, given its established relationship to increased motivation, commitment, and performance (Cook & Crossman, 2004; Jawahar, 2006; Pearce & Porter, 1986), understanding its antecedents is important for researchers and practitioners.

#### **Feedback Sign and PA Satisfaction**

In general, feedback can be viewed as positive or negative. Whether the same rating (e.g., a 4 on a 5-point scale) is perceived as positive or negative depends on the individual and is likely influenced by factors such as past performance and personal goals. Indeed, this subjectivity is an inevitability of performance evaluations and feedback.

Regarding the relationship between perceptions of feedback sign and PA satisfaction, it is intuitive that feedback perceived as negative should be related to lower PA satisfaction.

Similarly, when viewed as positive, individuals generally find feedback more acceptable and accurate, likely resulting in greater PA satisfaction (Brett & Atwater, 2001). Thus, we hypothesize direct relationships between perceived feedback sign and PA satisfaction.

*Hypothesis 1: Feedback perceived as positive is positively related to PA satisfaction.*

*Hypothesis 2: Feedback perceived as negative is negatively related to PA satisfaction.*

### **The Moderating role of Goal Orientation**

The relationship between feedback sign and PA satisfaction is likely altered by characteristics of the feedback recipient. Namely, we suggest the relationship is moderated by the type and level of one's predominant goal orientation, or the type of goals individuals adopt in achievement situations (Dweck, 1986).

Individuals may be primarily learning or performance goal oriented (Dweck, 1986), although it is possible to be simultaneously high (or low) on both (VandeWalle, 1997). According to Dweck (1986), individuals with a predominant learning goal orientation (LGO) wish to develop their competence, viewing ability as malleable, developed through effort and experience. Furthermore, they tend to have adaptive response patterns, characterized by the pursuit of challenging material and tasks and persistence despite setbacks. Conversely, individuals with a predominant performance goal orientation view ability as fixed and are more likely to have maladaptive response patterns, characterized by less interest in difficult tasks and a tendency to withdraw from tasks when failure is imminent (Dweck, 1986). Bifurcated into prove and avoid dimensions (VandeWalle, 1997), individuals with a strong performance-prove goal orientation (PPGO) focus on demonstrating their competence and gaining favorable judgments,

whereas individuals with a strong performance-avoid goal orientation (PAGO) focus on avoiding negation of their competence and avoiding negative judgments.

Regarding the moderating role of goal orientation on the negative feedback–PA satisfaction relationship, we propose the relationship is weaker for high-LGO individuals, who are likely to value feedback, regardless of its sign, due to its perceived usefulness for competency development (VandeWalle, 2003). Because they view feedback as useful diagnostic information, high-LGO individuals are likely to be satisfied with PA feedback even when it is negative. Consistent with this, high-LGO individuals are more likely to seek feedback (Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien, 2007), as potential costs of receiving negative feedback are outweighed by opportunities for valuable information (VandeWalle, 2003).

*Hypothesis 3: The negative relationship between negative feedback and PA satisfaction is weaker for individuals with higher LGO.*

We further propose that PPGO and PAGO accentuate the negative feedback–PA satisfaction relationship. Unlike high-LGO individuals, those high on PPGO and PAGO perceive feedback as an evaluative judgment of their ability. As such, given their tendency to view ability as relatively fixed, and therefore not likely to change based on feedback, they are less likely to value feedback in general. Negative feedback, however, is likely to be worse for high-PPGO and high-PAGO individuals, as such feedback is ego-destructive, with a high self-presentation cost and low impression management value (VandeWalle, 2003). That is, given high-PPGO individuals' desire to maintain their demonstration of competence and high-PAGO individuals' desire to avoid being viewed negatively, combined with their tendencies to view negative feedback as threatening (Cellar et al., 2011), they are likely to be particularly dissatisfied with negative feedback.

*Hypothesis 4: The negative relationship between negative feedback and PA satisfaction is stronger for individuals with higher PPGO.*

*Hypothesis 5: The negative relationship between negative feedback and PA satisfaction is stronger for individuals with higher PAGO.*

Finally, regarding the moderating role of goal orientation on the positive feedback–PA satisfaction relationship, we propose that PPGO is key. Individuals high on PPGO are concerned with demonstrating their competence and having others judge them positively. Concerned with managing impressions (VandeWalle, 2003), they want to be recognized for their actions. Positive feedback, then, would serve both an ego-constructive purpose and a recognition purpose.

*Hypothesis 6: The positive relationship between positive feedback and PA satisfaction is stronger for individuals with higher PPGO.*

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

A total of 234 staff employees (35% response rate; 68% female) at a large southwestern U.S. university completed a survey approximately three months after annual merit-based PAs were completed. On average, respondents had worked in their current position for 6.31 years ( $SD = 5.90$ ) and at the university for 10.82 years ( $SD = 7.87$ ). Due to some missing data (mostly for performance rating information), the final sample sizes were 167-169.

### **Measures**

*Goal orientation* was measured using VandeWalle's (1997) Goal Orientation Inventory. Five items measured LGO (e.g., "I enjoy challenging and difficult tasks at work where I'll learn new skills"), four items each measured PPGO (e.g., "I try to figure out what it takes to prove my ability to others at work") and PAGO (e.g., "I prefer to avoid situations at work where I might

perform poorly”). *Positive and negative feedback* were assessed with one item each (“I received positive (negative) feedback from my supervisor”). *PA satisfaction* was measured with five items from Greller (1978; e.g., “I am satisfied with the evaluation”). All measures used a 5-point response scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Coefficients alpha are in Table 1.

Because performance ratings could drive reactions (Pichler, 2012), we controlled for employee’s self-reported actual PA rating, from 1 (*does not meet expectations*) to 4 (*outstanding performance*) for Hypotheses 3-6. Additionally, given its relationship with responses to evaluative feedback (Johnson & Helgeson, 2002), we controlled for sex in all analyses.

### Results

Table 1 depicts descriptive statistics, correlations, and coefficients alpha for all variables. To test Hypotheses 3-6, predictor and moderator variables were centered and interaction terms created between the centered variables. Because moderated regressions yield a high Type II error rate (Aiken & West, 1991) and because of low power levels for tests of moderation in applied contexts (Stone-Romero & Anderson, 1994), an alpha level of .10 was used when testing interactions (see Stone, 1988).

As shown in Table 1, In support of Hypotheses 1 and 2, positive feedback was positively related to PA satisfaction ( $r = .48, p = .00$ ) whereas negative feedback was negatively related to PA satisfaction ( $r = -.21, p = .01$ ). Regarding Hypothesis 3, although an interaction emerged between LGO and negative feedback for PA satisfaction ( $\beta = -.13, p = .09$ ), the relationship was not as expected, being *stronger* for high-LGO individuals compared to low-LGO individuals, who exhibited no relationship (see Table 2 and Figure 1).

As expected, negative feedback and PPGO interacted to predict PA satisfaction ( $\beta = -.14, p = .04$ ), with negative feedback negatively related to PA satisfaction for high-PPGO individuals

but unrelated for low-PPGO individuals (see Table 3 and Figure 2). A similar interaction emerged between negative feedback and PAGO for PA satisfaction ( $\beta = -.18, p = .01$ ); negative feedback was negatively related to PA satisfaction for high-PAGO individuals but unrelated for low-PAGO individuals (see Table 4 and Figure 3). Thus, Hypotheses 4 and 5 were supported.

Finally, results revealed an interaction between positive feedback and PPGO for PA satisfaction ( $\beta = -.14, p = .03$ ). However, contrary to Hypothesis 6, the relationship was *stronger* for low- (vs. high-) PPGO individuals (see Table 5 and Figure 4).

### Discussion

Over 15 years have passed since Murphy and Cleveland (1995) referred to reaction criteria as “neglected criteria” (p. 310). Although researchers have begun to examine factors that lead to enhanced PA reactions, none have specifically examined the influence of goal orientation on the relationship between feedback sign and PA satisfaction. Our findings demonstrated that the relationship between negative feedback and PA satisfaction became stronger with higher LGO, PPGO, and PAGO. Although expected for PPGO and PAGO, this was unexpected for LGO. It seems, contrary to our expectations, that high-LGO individuals are not necessarily appreciative of all types of feedback. It may be that negative feedback paired with developmental information would be more favorably received. More research is needed to test this possibility.

Additionally, the relationship between positive feedback and PA satisfaction was stronger for individuals *low* on PPGO and weaker for individuals *high* on PPGO, rather than vice versa. However, the highest levels of satisfaction were reported by those viewing feedback as the most positive for both high and low PPGO individuals and the difference between these two groups was negligible.

In addition, our results revealed that, whereas perceptions of positive and negative feedback were directly related to PA satisfaction, the relationships were not strong. An implication is that PA reactions are not entirely dependent on subjective evaluations of the feedback received. Thus, attempts to generate PA satisfaction by minimizing negative feedback and maximizing positive feedback may not work entirely as intended. More research is needed to examine what variables influence PA satisfaction beyond feedback.

Worthy of note is our findings suggest that only between 4% and 10% of the variance in how much feedback is viewed as positive and negative can be accounted for by the (self-reported) actual overall performance rating received. This further validates that feedback is relative (e.g., to expectations, previous performance, etc.) and suggests that researchers should probe further to determine what are the various criteria that employees use when gauging ratings as positive or negative and what drives those criteria. It may be inappropriate to use a certain absolute cutoff score on evaluations as reflecting a positive or negative evaluation. Instead, it is important for researchers and practitioners to acknowledge that employee perceptions matter and should be accounted for in the management of performance.

While previous researchers have examined the relationships between goal orientation and *feedback-seeking* (e.g., VandeWalle, 2003), this study examines reactions to feedback *received*. PA feedback is often provided whether sought or not, and an understanding of individual differences that may influence these reactions is important. Research has revealed that goal orientation can be induced (e.g., Stevens & Gist, 1997). Thus, managers providing feedback may be able to activate a certain goal orientation in their employees to facilitate PA satisfaction. Nevertheless, our focus was on trait goal orientation. More research is needed to determine the influence of manipulated goal orientation on PA satisfaction.

**Strengths and Limitations**

This study examines reactions to a real performance appraisal that had meaningful consequences for employees. Using a relatively large sample allowed us to better detect moderating effects. Additionally, because of the wide array of jobs our sample held, results are likely to generalize to a variety of jobs and individuals.

This study, however, is limited by our cross-sectional design, which does not permit causal inferences. Another potential limitation involves the single-source nature of our data. However, because our primary focus concerned interaction effects, common method variance is less concerning. Related to this, we were limited by the practical realities of gathering data from a field sample, including having to rely on self-reports of overall performance ratings rather than actual employment records. Future researchers should consider employing longitudinal designs and obtaining data from multiple sources.

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Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations for the Variables Examined*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Sex (1=male; 2=female)	1.69	0.46	---							
2. Overall Performance Rating	3.02	0.65	.22**	---						
3. Learning GO	4.14	0.70	-.02	.18*	(.88)					
4. Performance-Prove GO	3.08	0.89	-.03	.20**	.28**	(.80)				
5. Performance-Avoid GO	2.27	0.73	-.06	.02	-.14	.26**	(.81)			
6. Positive Feedback	3.99	0.84	.07	.33**	.27**	.10	-.07	---		
7. Negative Feedback	2.38	1.22	-.22*	-.22**	-.09	-.04	.15	-.12	---	
8. PA Satisfaction	3.71	0.75	.25**	.41**	.17*	.15	.02	.48**	-.21**	(.88)

*Note.*  $N = 167$ . Reliability coefficients (coefficients alpha) are along the diagonal. GO = Goal Orientation; PA = Performance Appraisal. All measures are self-report.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 2

Interaction between Negative Feedback and Learning Goal Orientation on Satisfaction with the Performance Appraisal

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1:				.19	.19**
(Constant)	2.01**	0.28			
Overall Performance Rating	0.41**	0.08	0.36		
Sex	0.28*	0.12	0.17		
Step 2:				.20	.02
(Constant)	2.16**	0.30			
Overall Performance Rating	0.37**	0.08	0.33		
Sex	0.26*	0.12	0.16		
Negative Feedback	-0.06	0.05	-0.09		
Learning Goal Orientation	0.09	0.07	0.09		
Step 3:				.22	.01 <sup>+</sup>
(Constant)	2.11**	0.30			
Overall Performance Rating	0.38**	0.08	0.34		
Sex	0.26*	0.12	0.16		
Negative Feedback	-0.04	0.05	-0.07		
Learning Goal Orientation	0.05	0.08	0.05		
Negative Feedback x Learning GO	-0.11 <sup>+</sup>	0.06	-0.13		

Notes.  $N = 169$ ; GO = goal orientation; \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*  $p < .05$ . <sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ . All measures are self-report.

Table 3

Interaction between Negative Feedback and Performance-Prove Goal Orientation on Satisfaction with the Performance Appraisal

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1:				.19	.19**
(Constant)	2.01**	0.28			
Overall Performance Rating	0.41**	0.08	0.36		
Sex	0.28*	0.12	0.17		
Step 2:				.20	.02
(Constant)	2.17**	0.30			
Overall Performance Rating	0.37**	0.08	0.33		
Sex	0.26*	0.12	0.16		
Negative Feedback	-0.06	0.05	-0.10		
Performance-Prove Goal Orientation	0.07	0.06	0.08		
Step 3:				.22	.02*
(Constant)	2.16**	0.30			
Overall Performance Rating	0.38**	0.08	0.33		
Sex	0.24*	0.12	0.15		
Negative Feedback	-0.06	0.04	-0.09		
Performance-Prove Goal Orientation	0.05	0.06	0.06		
Negative Feedback x PPGO	-0.09*	0.05	-0.14		

Notes. *N* = 169; PPGO = performance-prove goal orientation; \*\* *p* < .01. \* *p* < .05. All measures are self-report.

Table 4

Interaction between Negative Feedback and Performance-Avoid Goal Orientation on Satisfaction with the Performance Appraisal

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1:				.19	.19**
(Constant)	2.01**	0.29			
Overall Performance Rating	0.41**	0.08	0.36		
Sex	0.28*	0.12	0.17		
Step 2:				.20	.01
(Constant)	2.12**	0.30			
Overall Performance Rating	0.39**	0.08	0.34		
Sex	0.25*	0.12	0.15		
Negative Feedback	-0.07	0.05	-0.11		
Performance-Avoid Goal Orientation	0.04	0.07	0.04		
Step 3:				.23	.03*
(Constant)	2.18**	0.29			
Overall Performance Rating	0.40**	0.08	0.35		
Sex	0.21 <sup>+</sup>	0.12	0.13		
Negative Feedback	-0.09 <sup>+</sup>	0.05	-0.14		
Performance-Avoid Goal Orientation	0.05	0.07	0.05		
Negative Feedback x PAGO	-0.15*	0.06	-0.18		

Notes. *N* = 169; PAGO = performance-avoid goal orientation; \*\* *p* < .01. \* *p* < .05. <sup>+</sup> *p* < .10. All measures are self-report.

Table 5

Interaction between Positive Feedback and Performance-Prove Goal Orientation on Satisfaction with the Performance Appraisal

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1:				.19	.19**
(Constant)	1.99**	0.29			
Overall Performance Rating	0.42**	0.08	0.37		
Sex	0.27*	0.12	0.17		
Step 2:				.33	.14**
(Constant)	2.47**	0.27			
Overall Performance Rating	0.26**	0.08	0.23		
Sex	0.27*	0.11	0.17		
Positive Feedback	0.35**	0.06	0.39		
Performance-Prove Goal Orientation	0.06	0.06	0.07		
Step 3:				.35	.02*
(Constant)	2.49**	0.27			
Overall Performance Rating	0.25**	0.08	0.22		
Sex	0.28**	0.11	0.17		
Positive Feedback	0.35**	0.06	0.39		
Performance-Prove Goal Orientation	0.06	0.06	0.08		
Positive Feedback x PPGO	-0.13*	0.06	-0.14		

Notes. *N* = 169; PPGO = performance-prove goal orientation; \*\* *p* < .01. \* *p* < .05. + *p* < .10. All measures are self-report.

Figure 1

*Interaction between Negative Feedback and Learning Goal Orientation on Satisfaction with the Performance Appraisal*

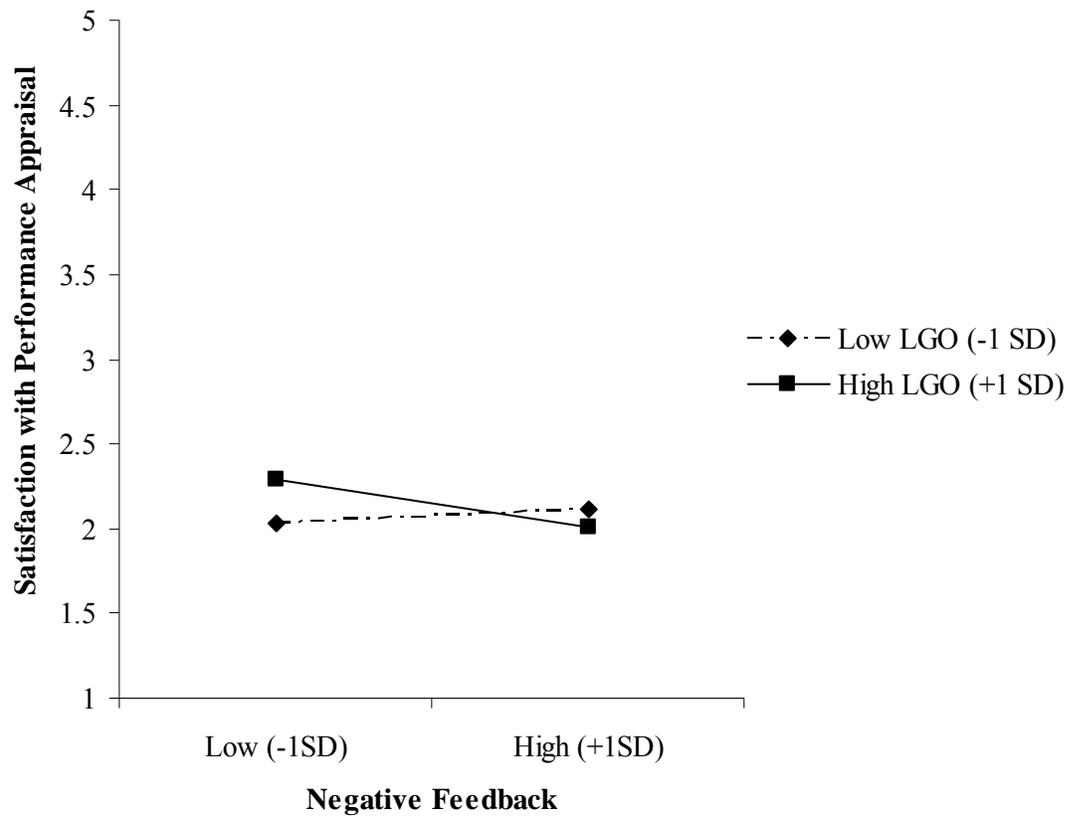


Figure 2

*Interaction between Negative Feedback and Performance-Prove Goal Orientation on Satisfaction with the Performance Appraisal*

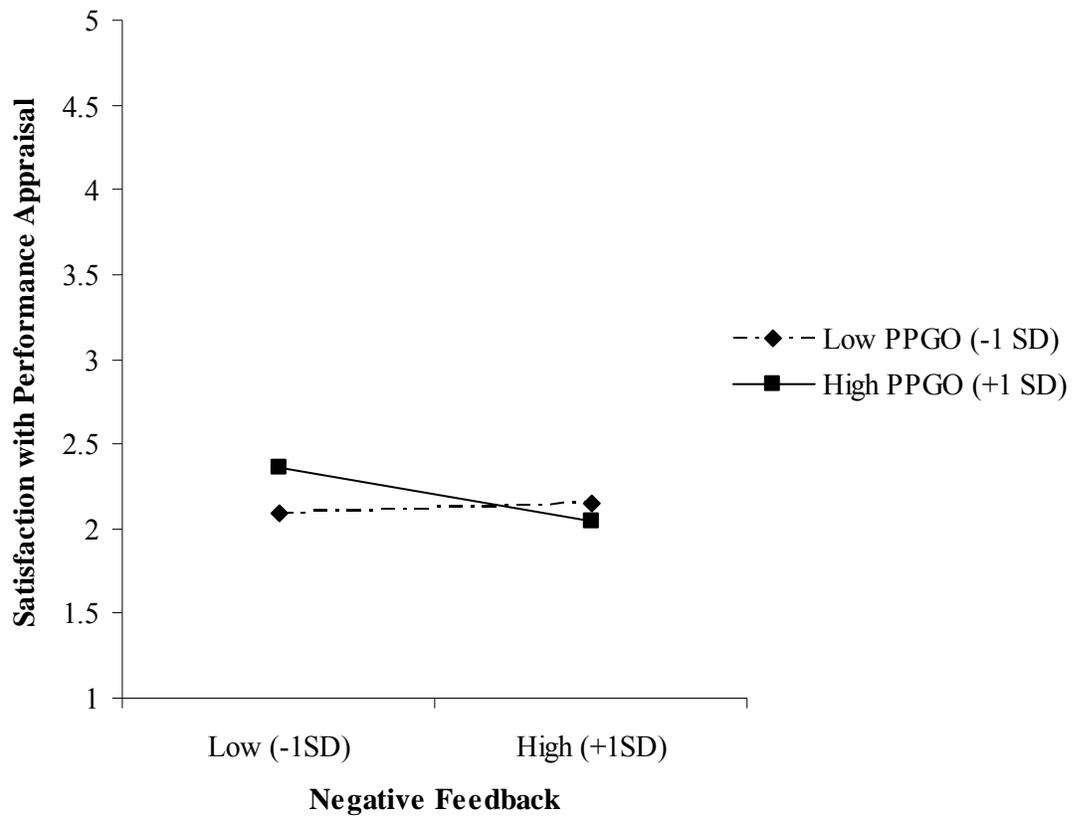


Figure 3

*Interaction between Negative Feedback and Performance-Avoid Goal Orientation on Satisfaction with the Performance Appraisal*

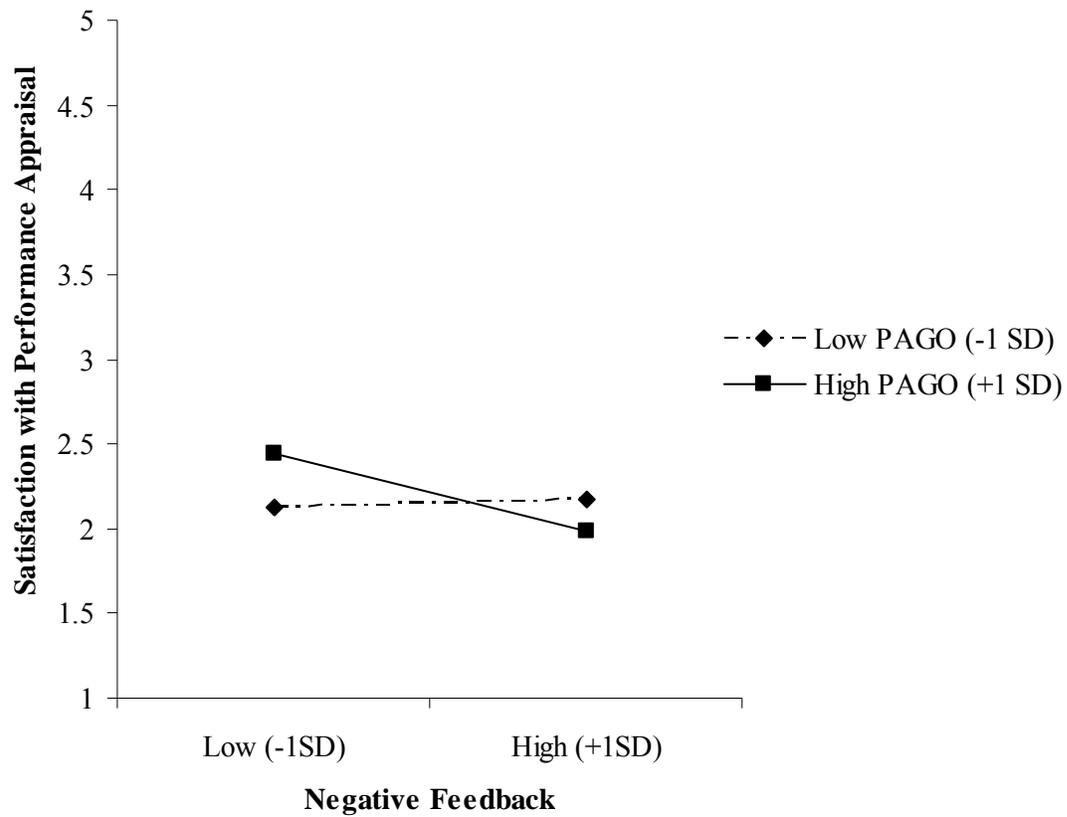


Figure 4

*Interaction between Positive Feedback and Performance-Prove Goal Orientation on Satisfaction with the Performance Appraisal*

