

Constructing Self-Efficacy at Work: A Person-Centered Perspective

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Constructing Self-Efficacy at Work: A Person-Centered Perspective

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Abstract

Purpose of this paper – The aim of this paper is to extend the focus of much literature on training and feedback as means for developing people’s self-efficacy. To generate a better understanding of people’s self-management at work, this article advances a person-centered perspective of self-efficacy formation and examines the ways by which people think about self-efficacy at work.

Design/methodology/approach – The qualitative study analyses 145 interviews with 74 people from six settings (management consulting, design, job search, restaurant service, telemarketing and financial trading).

Findings – The bottom-up coding suggested ten specific ways of thinking about self-efficacy. These were grouped according to two modes of thinking– attending and reflecting – and two foci– one’s doing and one’s environment. In combination, they represent four types of thinking: attending to one’s doing, attending to one’s environment, reflecting upon one’s doing, and taking a stance towards one’s environment.

Research limitations/implications – Further research needs to strengthen the validity of the new concepts and examine their relationships with antecedents and outcomes.

Practical implications – The article proposes two implications for HR development practice. First, people’s self-management capacity may be improved by coaching and training that raises people’s mindfulness of their ways of constructing self-efficacy. Second, the effectiveness of performance appraisal and 360° feedback may be improved by managers, HR practitioners and people themselves giving more attention to co-constructing relevant ways of thinking about self-efficacy.

What is original/value of paper – Adopting a person-centered perspective, this article proposes to view self-efficacy formation as a constructive process.

Key Words: Self-efficacy, Person-centered learning, Feedback, Training, Coaching

Paper Type: Research paper.

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Constructing Self-Efficacy at Work: A Person-Centered Approach

Introduction

In a time when organizations become ever more concerned about managing the performance¹ of their employees, much attention is given to goal setting, feedback, and performance appraisal. However, for people to actually achieve their goals and adapt to the expectations of others in the organization, they also need to believe in their abilities to do so. In other words, they require a confident perception of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Indeed, the positive link between self-efficacy and work-related behaviors is well established (Sadri and Robertson, 1993; Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998). Based on this evidence, it seems important to consider how people can develop and maintain a confident perception of self-efficacy.

Managers, trainers and coaches who wish to develop other people's self-efficacy can draw on a considerable body of research that has examined different sources of self-efficacy. This research demonstrates that people's self-efficacy can be raised by providing them with the experience of improved mastery in a task, social or cognitive models of the desired behavior, and verbal encouragement (Bandura and Jourden, 1991; Gist, 1989; Gist *et al.*, 1989; Shea and Howell, 1999, 2000; Silver *et al.*, 1995). While the primary attention in prior literature has been on how people respond to particular managerial interventions, we know less about how people think about self-efficacy when being engaged in their ongoing task in organizational settings.

In this article, we will address this question from a person-centered perspective. In the first part of the article, we will examine the relevance of this perspective to our understanding of self-efficacy formation in organizational settings. The second part of this paper develops a model of thinking about self-efficacy at work. This model resulted from my analysis of in-

¹ This article acknowledges but does not further develop the view that the meaning of performance differs according to whose perspective we adopt, i.e. that of the organization, managers, employees, or external stakeholders.

depth interviews with 74 individuals from across a range of diverse task settings including management consulting, design, job search, restaurant service, telemarketing, and financial trading.

A person-centered perspective of self-efficacy formation

The term ‘person-centered’ refers here to ‘the perspective of the individual who is judging self-efficacy’. Although a person’s perspective has not explicitly been addressed in prior self-efficacy literature, it is consistent with Bandura’s (1986) central argument that people’s self-reflection, forethought and modeling are important for our understanding of human performance. In line with this argument, the question of how people actually think about their ability to perform competently in their task is an essential one.

There are several reasons why the choice of a person-centered perspective is useful. First, our current understanding of self-efficacy formation presumes that self-efficacy is primarily developed through managerial interventions. However, such an assumption does not fit the realities of many contemporary work settings where many people are increasingly expected to self-manage their performance and take responsibility for their own learning. The need to self-manage one’s learning may result from project work that extends beyond the boundaries of any single organization (Grabher, 2002), short-term employment contracts (Barley and Kunda, 2006), concerns that one’s age, tenure, and status make it inappropriate to inquire proactively for positive feedback and training (Ashford and Northcraft, 1992; Ashford and Tsui, 1991; Maurer, 2001), and people’s personal desire to initiate changes in their organizations (Meyerson, 2001; Morrison and Phelps, 1999).

Second, a person-centered perspective helps us address which of the sources of information in the organization people consider relevant and credible. This question is important because formal feedback and training have shown to become less effective means for developing self-efficacy as people gain experience (Baron, 1988; Cervone and Peake, 1986; Eden and Zuk, 1995). The decreasing relevance of training may result from experienced

people's, typically, broader and more complex roles (Axtell and Parker, 2003). They may also be more interested in specific feedback that is relevant to their managerial effectiveness than in praise and encouragement (Ashford and Tsui, 1991). For experienced people to further grow their self-efficacy, they do not simply require positive feedback, but specific and credible cues about improved mastery in their task (Bandura and Jourden, 1991).

Finally, understanding how people think about self-efficacy may inform why some people with high self-efficacy fall prey to their miscalculated overconfidence, while others adapt effectively to changes in their environment. Prior literature explains people's overconfidence with their reduced motivation (Cervone and Wood, 1995; Stone, 1994; Vancouver *et al.*, 2001) and ineffective information processing (Audia *et al.*, 2000; Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998). However, these explanations remain contentious (Bandura and Locke, 2003; Shea and Howell, 2000). A more fine-grained understanding of people's actual thinking about self-efficacy may help illumine this question.

Methods

Research Context

To address the question of how people develop and maintain self-efficacy within the context of their everyday work, this study analyses qualitative data collected in 145 interviews with 74 people from six different settings: management consulting, design, job search, restaurant service, telemarketing, and financial trading. The selection of these settings seemed appropriate for two reasons. First, I expected that participants would be able to answer the questions because an ability to perform competently was important to success in all of the six settings. Second, sampling from a range of settings with varied task and organizational characteristics promised to generate robust findings that are not limited to a particular context. Initial interviews with participants from the management consulting and job search contexts suggested four preliminary dimensions along which these settings could be differentiated: collaboration with others, short-term/transactional exchanges, degree of task routine, and

negative outcome feedback. The four other sites seemed suitable because they complemented the initial two settings in terms of these task characteristics. I am describing the six sites in Table I.

Insert Table I about here.

Data Collection

Table II summarizes the frequency and intervals of interviews, if I was able to conduct more than one interview with a person. The interviews typically lasted between 30 – 60 minutes. However, interviews with waiters and telemarketers required only 20 – 5 minutes because the roles were fairly routine and of limited breadth. Since longer interviews with people from these two groups would have been artificial, their relative shortness was compensated for by conducting more interviews. All conversations were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Throughout the process of data collection, I also took field notes summarizing and annotating my observations.

Insert Table II about here.

During the semi-structured interviewing, I aimed at eliciting interviewees' interpretation of their experiences of work, their ability to deal with performance expectations, and feedback. As the following examples illustrates, I avoided the use of theoretical terminology: "How do you know that you can do a good job?" "How competent do you feel in your current role?" "Can you judge how well you can work this relationship [referring to a demanding client]?" "What gives you confidence in the process [of doing the particular task]?" Since speaking about performance is personally and politically sensitive and may lead to response biases, I introduced myself as an independent university researcher and promised confidentiality. I tailored further questions in response to the context and themes that emerged during the interviewing. To strengthen the validity of accounts, I asked participants to describe specific events that were important to evaluating their abilities in this setting (Flanagan, 1954; Mantwill *et al.*, 1995).

Data Analyses

To generate new concepts that would help describe the ways by which individuals think about their ability to perform their task, I used an inductive process that involved four steps. During this first stage, I read the transcripts and, using software for qualitative data analysis (QSR N-Vivo), inductively generated over 100 'open codes' that described the meaning of 726 data episodes. The open codes represented provisional concepts that described the ways by which people interpreted information from their task, other people, and self (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The length of any episode could vary from a few lines to several paragraphs and some data episodes were associated to more than one open code (generating a total of 784 references).

The aim of the second stage was to build convergence around a few core ways of thinking about self-efficacy. I ordered the codes, merged overlapping concepts, and grouped related concepts under higher level categories. Throughout this process, I referred back to the original data episodes to ensure that the new concepts were consistent with the actual data. As a result of this iterative process of comparing data and concepts, I discarded concepts that referred to only one or a few episodes. As a result of this bottom-up process, I described ten distinct ways of thinking. Comparison between these ten categories suggested that they could be represented by four higher order concepts.

The objective of the third stage was to improve the clarity and the construct validity of the ways of thinking about self-efficacy. For this purpose, I asked two independent coders to replicate the association between the theoretical concepts and data episodes. Both coders had research experience in psychology and organizational behavior and received two hours of training in the coding system. They, then, analyzed independently a sample of 75 episodes representing more than 10 per cent of all 726 episodes. The agreement between independent raters and my original categorization ranged from Coefficient Kappa = 0.83 to 0.93, suggesting

acceptable agreement and inter-rater reliability of the constructs (Brennan and Prediger, 1981). As a result of meeting to clarify our disagreements, I further refined the emerging concepts.

Findings

The person-centered model of thinking about self-efficacy, in Figure I, attempts to advance our theorizing about self-efficacy formation. It groups four meta-level concepts along two dimensions. The first dimension distinguishes between two types of cognitions: attending and reflecting. Attending is the more outward-oriented cognition in so far as it describes a person considering environmental cues as credible sources of self-efficacy. The other aspect, reflecting, may also involve attention to environmental cues but emphasizes a person making sense and re-interpreting these. The second dimension distinguishes between two foci of a person's thinking about self-efficacy: doing and the social environment. Doing provides information from or about the task, its process and outcomes. The social environment provides information from observing or interacting with other people and the organization.

Insert Figure I about here.

By combining the two dimensions along two right-angular axes, the model outlines four spaces for different types of thinking about self-efficacy: attending to one's doing, attending to one's social environment, reflecting upon one's doing, and taking a stance towards one's social environment. Below, I illustrate each of these types of thinking by referring to the ten specific ways of thinking that I had initially identified in people's accounts. In this respect, we need to keep in mind that the two aspects of each dimension are not necessarily mutually exclusive. An advantage of positioning two concepts at opposing ends of the same dimension is that it offers a parsimonious way of graphic presentation and theorizing. Yet, people's accounts suggested that some of the ways by which they think about self-efficacy involve both attending and reflecting, or cues from both their doing and social environment. Despite removing us from the nuanced detail of specific ways of thinking about self-efficacy, the four meta-level concepts

proposed here offer a new understanding of people's self-efficacy formation that can more easily be generalized to settings beyond those included in this study.

Attending to one's doing

One type of thinking about self-efficacy is "attending to one's doing". It suggests that people develop confidence by drawing on enactive mastery experience, one the source of self-efficacy proposed by Bandura (1997). The two specific ways by which people attended to their doing, "focusing on the task" and "generalizing from previous mastery experience," provide us with a better understanding for how people themselves enact a sense of mastery. In brief, it appears that experience alone is not sufficient. Rather, people constructed their mastery by referring to internalized criteria (focusing on the task) or by building analogies between their present situation and previous events in their lives (generalizing from previous mastery experience). People's attempts at constructing connections between their present doing and their internalized criteria or recollections of previous doing illustrate that a hermetic separation between attending to and reflecting upon one's doing is pointless.

In a first instance, let me illustrate this type of thinking by referring to "focusing on the task." Here, a person evaluates their current doing based on certain criteria. Prior research has already shown that providing people with task feedback can help them develop confident and realistic self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura and Jourden, 1991; Shea and Howell, 2000). The present study suggests that for people to self-generate experiential sources of self-efficacy, they require internalized benchmarks. By referring to specific criteria or breaking down their task into more narrowly defined steps, people could self-generate immediate and actionable feedback. Distant final objectives are unlikely to do so. The following account by a restaurant waiter exemplifies this way of thinking. She and her colleagues had to meet the high service standards expected by the hotel chain. Their daily tasks involved setting up tables, preparing the hot buffet for meal times, taking orders, serving meals, and issuing bills. In response to my question of how she knew whether she was doing a good job, the waitress replied:

Make sure that everything is all right. The cutlery is polished, the glasses shine ... I know myself, if everything is all right. If tea and coffees were served right away and they [the guests] were acknowledged.

My closer inspection of the accounts that I had grouped under “focusing on the task” made it clear that criteria for self-evaluation did not always mean an imposed set of organizational or professional rules. In addition to performance standards, people evaluated their doing also based on process checkpoints, targets, established practices, job requirements, scripts and benchmarks. For the purpose of evaluating whether one was able to do one’s job, these criteria did not necessarily need to reflect objective performance standards. Some people referred to self-generated criteria. The following statement by a manager in the consultant firm illustrates how she derived confidence from creating the structure based on which she could evaluate the progress of her team toward their weekly project targets.

We try to plan ahead, and I try to make sure that I have constant targets and constant checkpoints over the weekdays, so that I know, we are on track as a team. If we manage to tick all the boxes on Thursday night, I am very pleased and I believe we have managed to do that so far.

A second way by which people attended to their doing was “generalizing from previous mastery experience.” Observing that people gained a sense of mastery by building analogies with successful mastery in their past reinforces the idea that mastery experience is less dependent on objective experience than on people constructing that experience. The different accounts suggested that people constructed a sense of mastery by drawing on their educational credentials, qualifications, or difficult situations they had resolved in the past. As the next quote by a change management consultant illustrates, the ability to generalize is particularly relevant to the transient project-oriented work context she is part of:

You very rarely do the same thing again. So it gives you more confidence if you can say, ‘I have done this sort of work, and I’ve touched on these areas.’

Attending to one’s social environment

Another type of thinking about self-efficacy that I described as “attending to one’s social environment” supports the central premise of the self-efficacy model that people do not

only learn experientially, but also socially (Bandura, 1997). People attended to their social environment in four specific ways: “relating”, “benchmarking”, “modeling”, and “identifying with the organization.” While the existing model of self-efficacy formation identifies positive role models and verbal encouragement as social sources of self-efficacy, the present observations point to the diverse range of social cues and interpretations that people use in their self-directed assessment of self-efficacy. As the following examples illustrate, these may also involve attending to non-verbal cues, seeing a peer struggle with their work as much as one does, or internalizing attributes of the organization,

First, “relating to others” describes all those ways of thinking about self-efficacy where people drew on verbal and non-verbal cues from friendly and supportive interactions with their co-workers, superiors and clients. Here, people referred to the trust, informality, openness and respect that they perceived in relations to their peers. In hierarchical relationships with superiors or clients, people seemed to gain confidence from being given more responsibility, shown respect, and asked for advice. The following statement by one of the designers illustrates how her sense of confidence was strengthened by positive and constructive relationships with her client.

[In this client], the types of people, they’re probably quite similar to us, quite honestly, which is nice! I mean it’s lovely; it’s a joy to work with. You always come out of the meetings feeling completely enlivened by the way they’ve received the information, and sort of grow it. It’s not just you handing something over and they go ‘Okay that’s what we’ll do.’ They expand on it as well. We work together as a team; and I think when that happens, you get a sort of heat and an energy that you don’t get when you’re simply creating something and handing it over.

In addition to providing positive cues, relating to others also provided a sense of mastery, in particular in tasks that require high levels of competence in interactions with customers and colleagues. The next quote by a salesperson illustrates this case:

A nice call is not necessarily an ‘easy’ one. Not one that says ‘Yes’ straight away, but one that says ‘Oh, well, I wouldn’t use it’ – and if you can persuade them. [...] If you’ve worked for the sale, then it’s far more satisfying than if they’ve just said ‘Yep. Okay, that’s great.’

A second way by which people attended to their social environment was “benchmarking.” This way of thinking describes one of the ways by which people use social comparison when constructing self-efficacy. The accounts suggested that people may be referring to their peer group or a specific person to establish a performance standard when the criteria by which their mastery could be evaluated are ambiguous or socially-construed. The next quote by an MBA job seeker illustrates benchmarking:

I was quite pleased to have got [this interview], because it’s the first consultancy that’s short-listed me. And, they told me that they had 90 applicants, and they only short-listed 14. So I was quite pleased that I got through to that stage.

The role of benchmarking for establishing realistic performance criteria is also illustrated by the following quote where a management consultant refers to observing how her colleagues may be experiencing similar difficulties as she does. In this case, downward comparison seemed to help this person form more realistic expectations and relax her rigorous internal standards.

I keep in contact with my peers on the project and chat how it’s going for them. When you are having a very de-motivating day, you look at someone over there, and they have a bad day too and you know it’s not just me.

“Modeling,” a third way by which people attended to their social environment, confirms that this source also plays a role in people’s self-directed thinking about self-efficacy. When modeling, people referred to adopting desirable behaviors and approaches that they observed among superiors and coworkers. The following quote from a restaurant waiter provides an illustration:

I look to everybody. Even a waiter can teach you something. Anything that you’re not sure of by yourself and you see someone doing it that way, and succeeding, then you just go like “Okay, I’m going to try it that way, because it might work?” So, when I was still a waiter and my restaurant manager was twenty years old, and he was a restaurant manager! The guy was just brilliant. ... For me he was a myth, he was some kind of a god. I said, ‘Gosh, a restaurant manager at twenty, this guy must be good.’ And you know, anything he did, I copied. Not copied, but, you know, I followed. Wherever you work, you take, a bit of that, a bit of that. That’s what actually grows you and completes you.

“Identifying with the organization” was a fourth way of attending to one’s social environment. Here, people constructed their self-efficacy based on attributions they made about their organization. Identifying as a way of thinking about self-efficacy adds to our prior understanding of self-efficacy formation by pointing to the role of the larger organizational context as a source of self-efficacy. People seemed to construct self-efficacy by referring to their organizations’ reputation, its brand name, or the congruence they perceived between their own values and that of the organization (i.e. ‘cultural fit’). The following quote by a designer illustrates how identifying helps to maintain self-efficacy in novel working relationships where designers can not look back at a track record of previous interactions.

It is important that I work for a company that is well respected within the industry. I think we are respected before we walk into the room. So people might not agree with some of the work we’ve done, but they know who we are and they generally know what we’ve done.

Identifying with the organization is not a way of thinking that will work for all people under all circumstances. The more frequent reference to “identifying” among designers, job seekers and waiters was in accordance with the reputations of the respective organizations. Conversely, identifying was neither referred to by salespeople nor traders. In the case of salespeople this resulted from them working for only a relatively short period of 3-4 months on the telemarketing campaign. In the case of traders, their relationship to their employer seemed to be highly ambiguous as a result of the high performance pressures and the threat of redundancy. Another characteristic of this highly transactional employment context was that many traders would willingly change to another bank if it offered better conditions.

Reflecting upon one’s doing

“Reflecting upon one’s doing” involved people self-reflectively reinterpreting negative feedback. This third type of thinking about self-efficacy was illustrated by “learning from setbacks” and “contextualizing the task.” These two ways of thinking suggest that people can maintain, or possibly even improve, their sense of mastery by integrating their various experiences into a more differentiated sense of ability. Observing people reflect about their

doing adds another angle to our existing understanding of self-efficacy formation. Prior literature explained the effect of negative feedback on people's self-efficacy largely in terms of individual differences. For example, Silver *et al.* (1995) suggested that people with a high level of self-efficacy attribute negative feedback to external causes while people with low self-efficacy attribute negative feedback to their lack of abilities. Wood and colleagues (Taberner and Wood, 1999; Wood and Bandura, 1989) argued that people with an incremental (or malleable) conception of ability interpret negative feedback from a learning perspective whereas those with a fixed conception of ability see it as a confirmation of their lack of abilities. What has been missing so far is an understanding of the actual interpretative processes by which people in organizational settings interpret negative feedback.

The definition of "learning from setbacks" emerged out of accounts where people spoke about how they dealt with the mistakes they had made. For example, people described how they were consciously taking a learning attitude and accepting their novice status. This observation challenged the notion that a learning attitude always results from such a self-concept. When thinking in this way, people emphasized the effort and persistence they gave to their work. The following quote by a management consultant illustrates how he derived some sense of efficacy by inferring meaning from a negative appraisal.

Quite a few things that I thought, I wasn't doing very well, were written down [in my last appraisal] "Tom isn't doing very well in this" – in various things. So one thing that gives me confidence is that, at least, I am recognizing my own weaknesses, and I know what I could be doing better. I suppose the fact that you recognize them, you are half-way there.

The relatively more frequent occurrence of this way of thinking among management consultants (50% of all episodes) suggested that the use of learning from setbacks was associated with the developmental career perspective that was prevalent in the consulting firm. The developmental values were reinforced by the competency-based career development model and the 'up-or-out' promotions policy of the firm. In contrast, jobs with more of a

routine nature did not encourage learning from setbacks. Therefore, it was not surprising that people in those settings engaged in other ways of responding to negative feedback.

When “contextualizing the task” people reflect about their doing based on situational knowledge. For example, people interpreted feedback by referring to particular circumstances in their environment such as a novel situation, the organization’s culture, political dynamics among senior management and clients, and market dynamics. In some instances a situated understanding of the contingencies that affect one’s performance provided people with more confidence in the ability to deal with these demands. In other situation, contextualizing was used to attribute negative feedback to external circumstances. As the following quote from a trader reveals, his understanding of market dynamics helped him interpret his financial performance:

I can go home and I’ve made a loss and feel I’ve had a good day because I know I could have lost a lot more money. I can also go home and have made money, and feel bad, because I’ve missed opportunities to make more money.

Taking a stance towards one’s environment

People also responded to negative feedback by “taking a stance towards their environment.” They did so in two ways, “distancing” and “asserting personal perspective.” “Taking a stance towards one’s environment” appeared to be the flipside of “attending to one’s environment”, as “reflecting upon one’s doing” seemed to be the flipside of “attending to one’s doing.” When people where taking a stance, they named the negative experience but lowered its relevance by emphasizing their personal criteria or perspective.

“Distancing” described a range of different ways by which people responded to negative feedback. For example, people sought to distance from the source of feedback or the professional role toward which the feedback was directed. They also engaged in self-talk, named their emotions, limited their responsibility, or compartmentalized unsatisfactory outcomes. People justified their use of “distancing” from setbacks and criticism by saying that it helped them avoid futile self-reflection and its negative affect on their subsequent

performance. The observation of this way of thinking is in line with the distancing strategy described in studies of emotional coping (e.g. Folkman *et al.*, 1986). In contrast to “learning from setbacks”, people engaged in “distancing” when a highly structured task provided little opportunities for learning. As the following quote shows, this situation was particularly relevant for salespeople on the telemarketing campaign. Since their performance depended on the number of attempted calls, there was no purpose in dwelling on setbacks. Instead, it seemed more appropriate to ‘move on’ and attempt the next call with an optimistic attitude.

If you don't sell well at the end of the day, I think, I was cheated. But tomorrow is another day. That's how you have got to think, otherwise you get so demoralized, and you would be thinking, you are going to lose tomorrow.

Another way by which people took a stance towards negative feedback was “asserting personal perspective.” Here, people emphasize that they consider their unique capabilities, personal values, convictions and standards as primary authority for judging their performance. What became clear from people's accounts was that not responding to negative feedback was not just a matter of ignoring it or down playing its relevance. Rather, people acknowledged it but also emphasized their own perspective.

For example, designers reported disappointed when a client criticized one of their creative ideas. Yet, they also looked at such critique by emphasizing the avant-garde, artistic status that they claimed with respect to more conservative business clients. For job seekers, a rejection was disappointing as it closed access to a potentially desirable job. Yet, given their relative independence from the recruiting organizations, a rejection also provided an opportunity for reassessing what type of job and organization one truly hoped to find. In retrospect, job seekers who asserted their personal perspective turned the organization that had rejected them into the rejected one. The following quote by a job seeker who participated in an assessment centre illustrates this way of thinking about self-efficacy:

I felt confident in the sense that I prepared for it mentally. But I didn't prepare for it in terms of doing a lot of exercises. And I felt confident in the sense that I really felt I was approaching it from the perspective of: ‘My name is Steve Rawlings [name changed] and this

is who I am at this particular point. Evaluate that against what your company needs are. – I can't say I can't improve or change over the next little while, but if you're basing me on now, then what you see is what you get. And from this particular point in my life, this is all I can offer you.'

Discussion

In this section, I will discuss what insights we can draw from the person-centered perspective of self-efficacy formation. In particular, I will elaborate the implications of viewing self-efficacy formation as a constructivist process. Following on from this, I will highlight some of the limitations of the present study and possible avenues for further research. Finally, I propose implications for HR development and coaching practices.

Viewing self-efficacy formation as a process by which people construct self-efficacy within their given context provides a fresh perspective to traditional thinking. According to the constructivist view, people's consciousness and knowing is proactive and self-organizing, rather than an imprint of whatever information they are presented with (Neimeyer, 1993). This perspective is rooted in the postmodern notion that our knowledge of the world and ourselves in relations to it are shaped by the cultures and subcultures we are part of, our history and circumstances (Berger and Luckmann, 1976). Accordingly, a constructivist perspective is less concerned about the correspondence between people's self-assessment and an empirical reality than with the consequences of their thinking (Bruner, 1990; Hollan, 2000; Neimeyer, 1993). This notion that people's knowing is directed at building meaning between past and present in order to sustain a proactive view of self is consistent with self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1986, 2001).

Four features that emerged from people's accounts lend support to the constructivist perspective. First, people's thinking about self-efficacy was an active process, even though they may not always have been conscious about how they attended and reflected upon information. It was 'active' in the sense that people were creating some meaningful coherence out of the positive and negative cues they were exposed to or generated. Second, this process

involved more than appraising the relevance of particular sources of information. For example, when people were “taking a stance towards one environment” they constructed confidence by naming the negative experience but countering it with an alternative interpretation. Third, people’s ability to construct self-efficacy was not necessarily constrained by the availability of particular sources of information. People also drew on a range of available cues including their memory. Fourth, a coherent view of self-efficacy was far from monolithic. Instead, it resembled more a creative bricolage than the neat piling up of positive experiences and observations.

A constructivist view adds to our view of how people develop and maintain self-efficacy in several ways. Where traditional perspectives have been concerned whether training and coaching that provide people with mastery experience, models, and persuasive feedback are effective means of developing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), the constructivist view suggests that self-efficacy results from a person’s ability to *generate* these sources within a given situation rather than from *accumulating* more of these. Moreover, a constructivist view emphasizes that the confidence, resilience, and adaptability that people derive from particular ways of thinking about self-efficacy are associated with their ability to respond to the given requirements of a particular situation. People are efficacious if they are able to act effectively within the culture of which they are part – its linguistic resources, rationales, and value system (Hollan, 2000).

Viewing self-efficacy formation as a constructivist process also extends realist assumptions about the role of negative feedback in adaptation. From a realist perspective negative feedback primarily indicates the need for adapting the ways one goes about one’s task, increasing efforts, or developing one’s skills. However, a realist perspective gives little attention to the ways by which people develop a confident view of their ability to respond to these adaptive demands. After all, accuracy of self-assessment is not necessarily a condition of effective performance (Langer, 1975). The description of different ways by which people

reflect upon their doing and take a stance toward their environment illustrate the important role of self-reflection in the process of construing one's ability with regards to increasingly demanding, broader, and complex roles. For example, "learning from setbacks" and "contextualizing the task" show that people do not simply comply with external feedback, but seek to define a proactive self in response to the negative feedback they receive. Even though "taking a stance" may appear to be associated with overconfidence, in some tasks such as telemarketing and job search it may be an appropriate response because rejections do not necessarily result from one's behaviors but other people's subjective preferences.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. The first relates to the inductive formulation of the ways of thinking about self-efficacy. The use of verbal accounts to generate insights about people's cognitions rests on the assumption that thinking about self-efficacy is within the realm of a person's self-awareness, that people's accounts are unbiased by their concerns about self-presentation, and that these accounts are not influenced by the time and context of the interview. Although I sought to build a trusting and involved relationship with the research participants and increase the relevance of the research question by sharing my intentions, directing their attention to recent experiences in their ongoing task, and following a flexible, semi-structured interviewing protocol, it remains methodologically difficult for researchers to tap into people's thinking.

Second, it remains problematic to generalize findings because sampling was not random. The chosen approach is appropriate for the purpose of identifying new theoretical concepts but requires further validation. Since the description of the ways of thinking about self-efficacy suggests that some of these occurred more frequently in some settings than in others, but also varied across individuals engaged in the same task, further research needs to give more attention to situational and individual determinants of people's preference for particular ways of thinking about self-efficacy.

As a third limitation, this study does not permit conclusions about the effect of particular ways of thinking about self-efficacy on people's level of self-efficacy, performance, and adaptability. The reported ways of thinking represent people's *attempts* at constructing self-efficacy but it remains unclear whether such cognitions will indeed help a person maintain and strengthen self-efficacy. Even if they do, certain ways of thinking may not necessarily help a person adapt effectively to the particular requirements of their task. Longitudinal research is required to shed more light on the consequences of people's use of particular ways of thinking about self-efficacy.

Implications

The constructivist perspective of self-efficacy formation advanced in this article has implications for enabling people to self-manage their performance and more conventional performance management practices. First, people's self-management capacity may be developed through training and coaching that raises people's mindfulness or meta-level awareness for the different types of thinking about self-efficacy. Building on recent research in the field of cognitive therapy, such self-management training should not simply consist of changing or 'reprogramming' people's ways of thinking according to the ways described in this paper (Teasdale *et al.*, 2000, 2002). Simply seeking to reprogram people's ways of thinking in order to boost their self-efficacy would be problematic because people are often not aware of their deeply entrenched cognitive strategies. Since people's ways of thinking about self-efficacy may be socially constructed, they may be unlikely to change such patterns, unless they gain an awareness of these dynamics (Taberner and Wood, 1999). Also, in the absence of further research that examines the effectiveness of the different ways of thinking about self-efficacy across different types of tasks, it remains difficult to recommend particular ways of thinking. Instead, developing mindfulness about one's thinking about self-efficacy helps people to evaluate its appropriateness for a given context and consider the potential risk of ill-adaptive overconfidence.

Specifically, this study suggests that mindfulness about self-efficacy may be raised by encouraging people to establish criteria by which to evaluate their doing, evaluate the realism of these criteria based on comparison with peers, draw on their wider experiences rather than limit themselves to their task at hand, and attend to relevant from the social environment (including superiors, peers, clients, and the organization). Furthermore, mindfulness about self-efficacy can help people to confront negative feedback. Mindfulness does not mean ignoring such feedback, but balancing it with one's personal perspective. By becoming aware about the different ways by which one can respond to negative feedback, people open up choices and can decide whether it may be more appropriate to learn from feedback or suspend dwelling on it.

Second, a constructivist perspective of self-efficacy formation has also implications for professional development planning, performance appraisal and 360° feedback. These practices are grounded in the assumption that providing people with more feedback raises their self-awareness about how their performance is perceived by others. It is further implied, that such self-awareness will motivate people to adapt their performance in line with organizational expectations (Ashford, 1989; Atwater *et al.*, 1998; Toegel and Conger, 2003). However, this realist assumption is rarely achieved because individuals' concerns for self-consistency and self-presentation may outweigh their desire for knowing how others perceive them (Ashford and Northcraft, 1992; Atwater and Yammarino, 1992).

By giving more attention to how people construct self-efficacy, managers and HR practitioners responsible for performance management may balance the external orientation encouraged by organizational competency systems, performance appraisal and 360° feedback. This does not mean 'sandwiching' negative news between bits of positive feedback. Instead, managers and HR practitioners may establish a balance by facilitating a dialogue where people can construct the abilities that will help them to become more effective in meeting performance standards and social expectations. By making people's reflections explicit, managers and HR practitioners can suggest a wider scope of ways by which people think about self-efficacy. For

example, a person who feels uncertain about his or her ability to respond to performance expectations may be encouraged to direct more attention to his or her doing when judging self-efficacy. In situations where people are frequently exposed to setbacks and negative feedback from clients, managers may propose exploring appropriate types of responding to negative feedback, such as “reflecting upon one’s doing” or “taking a stance”.

Conclusions

The person-centered approach adopted in this article opens our perspective to the range of ways by which people in organizational settings think about self-efficacy. Findings suggest that the strength of people’s belief in their capabilities may be less dependent on them being provided with positive efficacy cues than on their ability to construct contextually relevant and meaningful conceptions of self-efficacy. In contemporary organizational settings where individuals increasingly hold responsibility for their learning and development, coaching and performance management practices need to focus more on developing people’s mindfulness about the appropriateness of different ways of thinking about self-efficacy.

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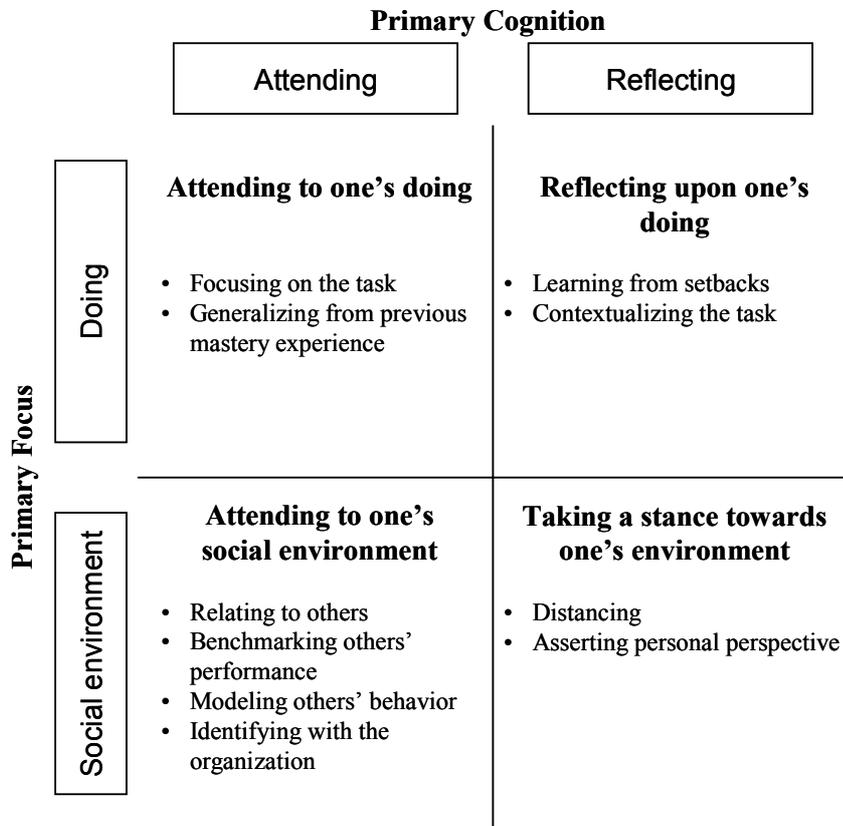
Table I. Description of sites

Setting	Collaborative task	Short-term Exchanges	Task Routine	Negative Feedback
<p>Consultants The work of the seven consultants in a large management consulting firm was characterized by a highly competitive career management system with an ‘up-or-out’ promotion policy. Typically, the work was organized in teams located at a client site. Consultants needed to interact with colleagues, contractors and clients. In some instances, consultants worked fairly independently as part of a small virtual team, or at more isolated physical location.</p>	High	High	Mixed/ Medium	Low
<p>Designers The six designers worked in an environment that was shaped by the excellent reputation of the mid-sized design firm as a creator of innovative brands. There was little threat of redundancy. The work for clients was organized in projects demanding collaboration with colleagues and clients, high commitment and long working hours.</p>	High	Low	Low	Low
<p>Job seekers The sampling of 13 job seekers who were enrolled as MBA students at a prestigious business school was different from the typical work context of employees. Yet, thinking about self-efficacy was highly relevant to job seekers because they needed to convey confidence in order to obtain high caliber jobs with consulting and financial organizations, often despite a lack of previous experience in the particular position or industry. By sampling from this setting, I hoped to gain a better understanding of thinking about self-efficacy in highly independent and competitive task.</p>	Low	High	Low	High
<p>Waiters The work of the 16 waiters was influenced by the service standards of the international hotel chain to which the restaurant belonged. Following a short on-the-job training, the work was of routine nature but required some coordination with other waiters and courteous interactions with guests. .</p>	Mixed/ Medium	High	High	Mixed/ Medium
<p>Salespeople The task of the 27 salespeople from three temporary outbound telemarketing campaigns was to promote the membership schemes of golf club and beach resort hotels to local business people. While salespeople had to follow a prescribed sales script, the most difficult aspect of their job was dealing with the negative feedback from the people whom they cold called. The work on the campaigns was characterized by an explicit performance orientation. In order to stay on the job and receive the base salary, each salesperson had to close at least three sales per week. While attaining 1 – 3 sales per day was feasible for more experienced salespeople, achieving the weekly target appeared more challenging for at least a third of the staff.</p>	Low	High	High	High
<p>Traders The work of five financial traders and salespeople came from three investment and merchant banks was characterized by high performance pressures. The work was perceived to be highly competitive given the common practice of banks to regularly lay off large numbers of low performing traders in response to stock market lows. One bank reinforced the competitive atmosphere by circulating information on individual profit and loss statements among all team members.</p>	Low	High	High	High

Table II. Description of data collection

Setting	Number of Interviewees	Number of Interviews	Visits	Intervals (weeks)
Consultants	7	18	16	4-6
Designers	6	6	3	One-time
Job seekers	13	46	46	4-14
Waiters	16	17	4	6-12
Salespeople	27	53	4	8
Traders	5	5	4	One-time
Total	74	145	77	

Figure I A person-centered model of thinking about self-efficacy



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