The Subordinate's Side of the Story: The Practice of Contextual Components in Constructive Criticism

Abstract: In contrast to the prior constructive criticism literature that has focused on the attributional perspective, we investigate how high context communicators practice contextual cues. Using a multiple-case, inductive study of subordinates' norm violation happened in Chinese organizations, the process model of constructive criticism presents how high context communicators manipulate the contextual components: people evaluate the quality and degree of constructive criticism via the mix of message and spatial context, determine whether accept it at once by relationship context; if not, people spend time to get self-introspection to accept it.

Keywords: Constructive criticism, Contextual components, High communication context

1. Introduction

Contextual cues are highly intricate in the high communication context, and China is classic type of it (Kittler, Rygl & Mackinnon, 2011). For decade, research in the field of Chinese constructive criticism invariably evidenced their intricacy (Zhang, Reyna & Huang, 2011). For example, why some supervisors keep silent toward subordinates' underperformance? How do subordinates capture the meaning of constructive criticism from their supervisors? While many Chinese organizations have explicit rules or procedures to handle norm violation, both managers and employees still highly rely on contextual cues to deal with norm violation.

Previous research defines that constructive criticism as the tool to manage underperformance or provide the feedback for the purpose of promoting some aspects of one's life or work (e.g., Zhang et al., 2011; Lamborn, Fischer & Pipp, 1994). Constructive criticism is a positive

intervention, which relates to prosocial effects on subsequent motivation whereas criticism is a negative intervention including hurt, awkward or belittle someone and robustly associates with some adverse outcomes (Renshaw, 2008; Peterson & Smith, 2010). Constructive criticism often happens in the supervisor-subordinate or faculty-student relationship that allows the one improves his/her behavior or work performance, such as the work productivity, education gains, work quality, strategy of coping with a difficult task or handling a conflict. Like other communication, whether constructive criticism is effective relies on how it is delivered and interpreted. Meaning can be conveyed through the verbal and the nonverbal cues, which always relates to Hall's communication context model (Hall, 1989). Researchers found that nonverbal cues of communication transmit about 65% of the meaning in an interaction (Birdwhistell, 1955). While context has caught attention in the field of constructive criticism in last decade (e.g., Petress, 2000; Leung et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2011), there has not been sufficient work in identifying how receivers practice it depending on contextual factors.

The purpose of this work is to examine how high context communicators practice contextual components of constructive criticism. If message truly mixes other contextual factors to concrete the meaning of constructive criticism, this raises two fundamental research questions: How do subordinates evaluate the quality of supervisors' constructive criticism? If people actively use context to get their perception of constructive criticism, this would provide a more richer and multi-channeled resource to improve their understanding. Second, how do subordinates judge the degree of constructive criticism? We are aware to comprehensively investigate constructive criticism in Chinese organizations where managers and employees would require multiple factors involving, such as organization climate, organizational politics, organizational culture, task

features, leadership, personality and so forth. However, we tend to narrow down the scope of our study in order to investigate the purpose of this research and generate crucial insights. Therefore, we focus on describing and analyzing constructive criticism from contextual perspective. Although organizational culture and climate will be discussed, the communication context is the fundamental theory on which this study rests. As noted above, since past research mainly focuses on dispositional attribution of constructive criticism (Leung & Morris, 2001; Weiner, 2000), there is little theory to guide our consideration in the practice of contextual components in constructive criticism. Therefore, we conducted a multiple-case, inductive study of subordinates' norm violation in Chinese organizations. Because state-owned enterprises and public institutions tend to be social-cultural specific, and manifest more culture values (Ngo, Lau & Foley, 2008) than other types of enterprises (i.e., joint venture, foreign enterprises, and private enterprises), and require various work related feedback between managers and employees, they provide a rich and high context to investigate the contextual factors and how they are combined with message to convey constructive criticism.

This study makes several contributions: first, we reconceptualize constructive criticism as the prosocial feedback for personal improvement and organizational development. People tend to receive both encouraging positive feedback and apparently harsh or painful feedback with affection in nature. Second, we find evidence that employees rely on contextual information to evaluate the quality and degree of constructive criticism. Third, we present a process model of constructive criticism to show how contextual factors are combined across time. Fourth, our research provides a crucial phenomenon that Chinese people with shared understanding switch their implicitness/indirectness to explicitness/directness when their consensus breaks up,

contradicts the view of high context communicators always highly rely on implicit message.

2. Hall's Context of Communication

In the research of communication context, Hall classified it into high-context communication and low-context communication (Hall, 1989). High-context communication refers to the context that most information is embedded and very little needs to be deciphered or explicitly expressed (Hall, 1989: 91). Chinese, Japanese and Korean are typically high-context communicators who invariably use intricate and subtle style of communication, such as nonverbal cues, metaphor and status to transmit information.

While the preprogrammed information has already infused in the setting and internalized in the interlocutors, context nurtured by culture has penetrated to the individual level to formalize the way of people's communication (Hall, 1989). Due to the collectivistic nature of the Chinese culture, many people in China are more attentive and sensitive to the contextual cues, emphasize more on their connectedness to status and relationships, higher depend on the judgment from others and the context, catch more closely implicit sensitivity from the surrounding (Cross, Bacon & Morris, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As a result, they engage in frequent constructive criticism to get self-enhancement and personal growth. For instance, Chinese educators and parents who perceive criticism, especially constructive criticism with more positive and prosocial connotation to socialize children (Chao, 1994; Wang & Fivush, 2005). When someone fails to meet one's target, he/she should receive constructive criticism to get self-enhancement (Leung et al., 2001).

Taking constructive criticism in much narrower contexts, such as the organizational context, Chinese with shared understanding tend to engage diverse communication strategies to protect and enhance face (Cardon & Scott, 2003). Face (*lian/mianzi*) is a crucial indication of one's dignity,

honor, self-respect, power, prestige, influence, and public image in front of other people (Hwang, 1987; Cardon & Scott, 2003). Chinese need to save face at all cost for moral reason and instrumental usage. For instance, Chinese managers cautiously use contextual cues - indirectness, silence, feedback privacy, shaming to deliver their feedback (Leung et al., 2001; Cardon & Scott, 2003) in order to save followers' face to further maintain their interpersonal harmony and ideal social order in negotiation, public speaking and work feedback. Otherwise, follower(s) may feel losing face and embarrassed due to the manager's harsh or public feedback on his/her underperformance. On the other hand, followers stress the contextual details to perceive managers' critical remarks (Zhang et al., 2011). Petress (2000) noted that contextual information in constructive criticism, such as intonation, privacy, timing, genuineness and sincerity, consequently licenses the favorable outcomes of the critical feedback. Hall (1989) proposed that message, relationship, space, and time are the crucial components to form the context of communication. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of constructive criticism requires consideration of all these contextual components.

2.1. The message context

Message is embedded in the interpersonal interaction and social-cultural system (Triandis, 1972). People in the high context of communication rely on the indirect and implicit message, such as metaphor, nonverbal cues, similar experience and previous interaction at the individual level (Bechky & Okhuysen, 2011), discipline, vision and expectation at the organizational level (Kostova & Roth, 2002; Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011), institution, custom and cultural artifacts at the aggregate level (Chen, 2004; Dacin et al., 2010). Hall (1989: 113) noted that people in the implicit/indirect communication tend to "talk around and around to the point" that putting all pieces into the focal event except the important one to expect listeners could capture its subtle

meaning from background, past interaction, and the environment. For instance, Chinese with shared understandings consider the concept “red packet” (Hong Bao or Li Shi) as part of a conversation of lucky money that juniors receive gift money from seniors in the Chinese new year (red packet means wrapping money in the red paper as good luck) or people send their best wishes to a newly married couple/a family who just move in a new house, or subordinates get “red packet” (bonus) contingent to their good performance from supervisors, or a manager receives “red packet” (bribe) secretly from his employees. Therefore, the ability to comprehend the implicit and indirect message requires shared understandings and common ground already existed in a given context.

2.2. The spatial context

The spatial context is various cues captured by all senses, such as intonation, odor, feeling, identity, physical distance, body language and privacy of place by visionary and non-visionary spatial context (Hal & Hall, 1990: 11). Gudykunst and his colleague (1996) reported that Japanese use silence as a meaningful communicative action to express their disagreement, seriousness or maintain interpersonal harmony. Research about self-construct indicates that East Asians with a stronger interdependent self-construal engage more field dependent thinking (Choi & Nisbett, 1998; Nisbett et al., 2001) and memorize more background objects in the context (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001) than independent self-construal Westerners. Leung, Su and Morris (2001) found Chinese subordinates evaluate the quality of communication with supervisors based on feedback privacy and superior status. Thus, spatial cues are crucial in the context of communication.

2.3. The relationship context

The relationship context not only refers to the nonverbal cues toward background of communicators (i.e., age, gender, profession, position and status) and other information (i.e., the

degree of concerning for others, interpersonal harmony, long-term relationship, face-saving, the need of humility, the involvement of personal life), but it also relates to the degree of communicators compartmenting their personal relationship from work relationship that impacts on the extent of conflict avoidance, face-saving and truth bending in communication (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012). People in the high context of communication emphasize the relational component by fitting in with the group and others or adjust their communication in accord with the relationship context (Markus & Kitayama, 1991: 570). Because Chinese interpersonal relationship (Guan Xi) bears features of affective attachment (Gan Qing) (Yang, 1994), familiar ties (Yang, 2002), sharing/exchanging (Kipnis, 1997) and showing respect to authorities (Leung et al., 2001), Supervisors show care/altruism and protect subordinates (Farh & Cheng, 2000) and frequently engage in social activities with subordinates in non-work settings (Bond & Hwang, 1986) to maintain their interpersonal relationship. Therefore, people in the high communication context are likely to stress interpersonal relationship and adjust their communication according to the relationship context.

2.4. The temporal context

The temporal context is defined by cultural variation in perceiving time, such as pace of life, quality of time, punctuality, time horizon, time focus, speed, passage, and meaning of time (Bluedorn, 2002; Brislin & Lo, 2006; Macduff, 2006). Time is differentiated as either monochronic or polychronic (Kaufman-Scarborough & Lindquist, 1999). Polychronic is particular true for Chinese that individuals with interdependent self value time on interpersonal harmony prioritizing tasks completion ahead of deadlines (Triandis, 1995). MacDuff (2006) observed that Asian student negotiators spend more time on maintaining interpersonal relationships and use more indirectly

elliptical language to get to the main point of negotiation than Western opponents. Because of the holistic information processing, people with interdependent self-construal tend to invest more time on observing the background objects when they engage in multiple tasks (Nisbett et al., 2001). People with dialectical thinking emphasize changes and predict things change from one extreme to the other extreme in a long term (Li, 1998). For instance, Chinese people think little of immediate gain and loss, but stress “the coexistence and interpenetration” of two contradictory sides (Zhang, Waldman, Han & Li, 2015) and consider the systematic change of things in a long period of time (Ji, Nisbett & Su, 2001).

3. Methodology

Because precisely *how people manipulate contextual factors to evaluate the quality and degree of constructive criticism was theoretical interest*, we investigated six cases of subordinates' norm violation from Chinese state owned enterprises and public institutions¹. This multiple-case, inductive study allows a “replication” that each is treated to confirm or disconfirm the logical judgement from priors, develops a holistic thinking of events in real life and induces the more reliable models² (Yin, 1984).

We included 6 cases to describe constructive criticism (3 were from public institution and 3 were from state owned enterprise). Five cases confirm constructive criticism and one case to

¹ We chose Chinese state-owned enterprises and public institutions as the research setting, which mirrors Confucianism that people stress hierarchy, relation harmony, reciprocity and authority chain (Chen, 1995) and highly depend on contextual components to perceive constructive criticism.

² To test reliability of our data collection and analysis, we manipulate the data according to a case study design that all participants from similar organizations received a series of same entry and exit sequence and interview questions; we also produce organized case data bases in a similar fashion for informants from organizations that we visited before. To enhance construct validity, we apply the evidence from different sources (see data collection) and conclude a chain of evidence from every interview. To promote external validity, we apply multiple-case, inductive design where by all cases were informants from the similar organizations and relatively similar in education, position and working experience. To enhance internal validity, we apply Yin's (1984) “pattern matching” method by comparing multiple patterns to analyze whether they are match or not.

demonstrate a seemingly constructive criticism but destructive in nature. The number of cases is determined by the theoretical sampling and stopped adding more when the incremental information diminished (Sutton & Callahan, 1987). We contacted 22 organizations to obtain the 6 cases.

3.1. Data Collection

We used three data sources: (1) qualitative data from semistructured interviews with subordinates who received constructive criticism from their middle level supervisors in state owned enterprises and public institutions, (2) emails and phone calls to clarify details in interviews and track event change process across time, (3) archival data, involving organization websites, publication and electronic documentation.

Semistructured interview. The first phase involved one group interview with eight middle level managers who had provided constructive criticism toward followers' norm violation in state-owned enterprises and public institutions. The pilot group interview indicated supervisors who offered constructive feedback during working time or after work toward subordinates' norm violation highly relies on contextual cues.

In the major data collection, we employed semistructured interviews for multiple informants in state-owned enterprises and public institutions, summarized in Table 1. Of a total 30 interviews, 25 were in-depth, and each took 45-90 minutes. We standardized interview protocols among informants and customize their hierarchical level, work content and tenure (Corley & Gioia, 2004). Similarity and differences among six cases are summarized in Table 2³. This interview involved 22

³ Table 2 shows shared important points of similarity among six cases: (a) involving Chinese practitioners (b) in the state-owned enterprises or public institution (c) who were guided to resolve the issue. The cases also held distinct differences: (d) timing to give constructive criticism (i.e., during work vs. after work), (e) intentionality of the violation (i.e., lack of awareness vs. purposeful disregard or accidental happening), (f) the implication of the violation (i.e., individual level vs. group level). Across all cases, the

open-ended questions in four aspects: (1) background information, organizational tenure, work content, skill levels and working time with their supervisors; (2) descriptions of personality and relationship of subordinates and their direct supervisors; (3) descriptions of constructive criticism events, perception and effects; (4) judgment of category, quality and degree of constructive criticism.

We also stress facts during the process of interviews. That is, the leader author was primarily responsible for the interviews to maintain consistency and the second for taking notes and filling questions. We followed Yin's (1984) instruction for within-case analysis: first, cross-checking, detailed recording facts and impressions of each interview on the day of interview to ensure the objective information; second, recording all information including those important and apparently unimportant with the subject; third, noting our impressions at the end of each interview. We further maintained confidentiality for informants to elicit accurate data. We transcribed more than 94 percent of interviews to enter into the database of case study and compare them with prior ones.

Informal communication. In the two continuous years after semistructured interviews, eleven telephone interviews (each lasts 25 minutes) and six emails were used to investigate on the specific question of the perception and impact of employees toward the impressive constructive criticism events to track the process of real-time event change.

Archival data. We tried to triangulate by collecting multiple sources, such as archival, organization websites publication and electronic documentation, and cross-checking information to reduce retrospective bias of interviews. These documents included three forms: (1) identity information, including paper and electronic descriptions of organization identity of informants and

difference of communication means that supervisors use to reconcile subordinate's violation is for the purpose of subordinates' work enhancement and organizational development.

direct leaders, and their demographics; (2) performance artifacts, involving paper and electronic documents of organization and personnel evaluation, performance evaluation, system of reward and penalty; (3) contextual information, including paper and electronic materials of organization strategy, culture, climate aspects and office location. These documents constituted a valuable secondary overlapping data source for constructive criticism.

(INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE)

3.2. Analysis Strategy

We integrate Hall's context of communication with constructive criticism research to demonstrate the critical incidents. Chinese regard constructive criticism as an effective motivational approach to achieve personal goal (Leung et al., 2001) and most of them with shared understanding apply contextual cues, including message (e.g., implicitness, voice volume, silence, eye contact), relationship (e.g., interpersonal harmony, face-saving, respect for authority), space (e.g., physical distance, criticism privacy) and time (e.g., self-reflection over time) to perceive the subtle meaning between interlocutors (Hall, 1989). Thus, when analyzing constructive criticism in the high communication context, it is crucial to understand any such analysis. We therefore map Hall's high context communication based on group boundaries, group bonds, and speech norm that are three components of "culture in interaction" model (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003: 740). In the study of martial art dojo, Cole (2015) used the three dimensions to explain communication between the master and foreign long-termers toward their norm-violation. In this study, we attempted to use the three criteria to analyze the data in six cases.

First, group boundaries "put into practice a group's assumptions about what the group's relationship (imagined and real) to the wider world should be while in the group context" (Eliasoph

& Lichterman, 2003: 739). In Chinese state-owned enterprises and public institutions, norms that all group members comply include formal rules/regulations and implicit shared understanding, and it is common that one employee challenges the organizational norm or one's behavior deviates from what is acceptable. Second, group bonds “ put into practice a group's assumptions about what members' mutual responsibilities should be while in the group context” (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003: 739). While it is known that China is typically hierarchical nature of relationships (Chen, 1995), respect for hierarchy and authority is magnified in SOEs and public institutions where supervisors are responsible for protect their subordinates and subordinates are unconditionally in deference or loyal to them. Third, speech norm “ put into practice a group's assumptions about what appropriate speech is in the group context (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003: 739). In the Chinese work settings, the meaning of constructive criticism between supervisors and subordinates can be conveyed by multi verbal message and nonverbal cues, such as silence, facial expression and physical contact.

4. Categories of Constructive Criticism

We revealed the major contextual components (message, place, relationship and timing) in Constructive Criticism from informants' interview. Below we describe Constructive Criticism events, and summarized its categories in Chinese state-owned companies and public institutions in Table 2.

(INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE)

4.1. When noticing subordinate(s) violate rules or disciplines during work/after work, leaders use criticism during the process of completing a task. Two stories below illustrate this approach.

Story 1: Mr. Wen was a Lieutenant who just took office. One night, he was drinking with a

sergeant when they were on duty, caught by a major.

(There was a monitor camera in the duty room)

The major: do you know you can't drink in the army? You are military men, but you guys still violate the discipline, (you are) too suck. Go to my office.

In his office, the air was frozen. The major criticized Wen in a harsh tone.

The major: You are high educated and smart, I thought you should have good quality and deeply understood the rules and disciplines. We have good relationship and I have high expectation on you, I don't get why you made such a stupid mistake! You violated the prohibition, and drank with your subordinate. If you don't treat yourself strictly, how can you lead your soldiers in future, how can they trust you? I won't tell anybody about this event, but if you do it again, you bear your own consequences.

Wen: Yes, Sir. I feel sorry about my mistake, and I won't do that again.

Then, the major severely criticized the sergeant (Wen's subordinate).

The major: Wen may not know the rule since he just took work, but you work here for ten years. You must be familiar with the rule, how you dare disobey?

(The sergeant held down his head and kept silence)

The major: You performed much better than your peers these days, so you have good chance to get the promotion. You dreamed to be the master sergeant, if you continue to violate, you'll have trouble... I won't punish you this time, but I always watch you. Go back and introspect.

(The officer continued to say sincerely)

The major: I'm a major, older than you, but I'm afraid to drink during work. You can't predict when the unexpected emergencies will happen in the army.

After that, Wen and the sergeant never violate rules, but work harder and support the major.

The narrator (Mr. Wen): When the major criticized me in front of my soldier, I felt ashamed.

But he concerned about my career and relationship with my soldiers, and he didn't expand the influence of this event, he saved our face. I was truly convinced though his criticism is really harsh.

Analysis

Norms: In story 1, Wen and the sergeant adjusted their bad behavior and became the faithful followers to the major, though the supervisor gave them the “severely” criticism. Some messages in this story, such as “we have good relationship and I have high expectation on you”; “you have good chance to get the promotion”, conveying affection, friendship, confidence, genuine interest and encouragement aroused their emotional dependence. Further, the major's words (“I won't tell anybody about this event”; “I won't punish you this time”; “not expand the influence of this event”) helped them maintain their self-esteem and keep face. Therefore, for the two subordinates, the major's care and protection cushioned his “harsh” criticism.

Group boundaries: Unlike other organization, army is characterized by more stringent discipline and high confidentiality where all soldiers resolutely obey orders and take discipline. When soldiers were on duty, they could not make any slight mistakes, nor violate provisions. Three interlocutors get involved in the conversation. The first violator, Mr. Wen just took office in the army, might be unfamiliar with disciplines, but his background education of graduating from one famous public university indicated he should have the better understanding of them. The second violator, the sergeant who worked in the army for over ten years was familiar with the regulations but still violated the norm. Such contradictory information offered hints that this young lieutenant and his soldier deliberately drank during the night shift – a violation of group boundaries. The

major stopped and took them into a private place when noticing their wrong behavior. In his office, the major further separately criticized them in different degrees: First, he criticized Wen in a harsh tone because he should not drink with his subordinate in the work time, but the major finally forgave him for his first offence; second, he criticized the sergeant in a more severe tone in front of Wen due to his deliberate violation regardless his ten-year army experience. In Wen's mind, if he not drank with the sergeant, his subordinate would not suffer such severe criticism. Thus, Wen felt ashamed not only because he challenged the norm, but also he thought he did not well protect his follower.

Group bonds: In the normal interaction of negative feedback, Chinese tend to use some implicit word round to the point or communicate with the violator in a private place. Not adhering to the discipline, Wen and the sergeant committed the violation in the military setting. It is interesting to note that the major stopped their violation with a mild public criticism due to being cautious of recorded video camera in the duty room (public space-spatial context), and further harshly criticized them in private (private place-spatial context). For the violators, the severe criticism the major gave was to protect them from losing face and prestige (face saving-relationship context), and provided a chance to correct faults. This captured the degree to which affection plays a role within the Chinese criticism – subordinates will obey the military discipline and be deference to the major when they feel affection in the criticism.

Speech norms: The conversation dynamics were rich in this story. First, the language in the interaction between the major and two violators in the night duty room showed that the major initially gave the explicit criticism toward Wen and sergeant's violation by only emphasizing the discipline (explicitness-message context). Second, three interlocutors continued their conversation

in private where the major offered two guys different levels of criticism (harsh tone for Wen and more severe tone for the sergeant) in an interesting way: When interacting with Mr. Wen, the major confirmed his work ability and their good personal relationship (relationship context), and showed his expectation on this young man (affection-relationship context). Then, he pointed the potential threat of drinking during the night duty. During the interaction with the sergeant, the major praised that he performed much better than his peers (confirmation-message context) and analyzed the seriousness of this mistake (explicitness-message context). However, when the major switched the topic to promotion that the sergeant truly concerned (affection-relationship context), the sergeant introspected and received the major's explicit guidance to that fact. Third, the major gave the implicit guidance to the two violators by telling his own story (implicitness-message context).

The middle level supervisors in the Chinese state-owned organization are likely to give positive evaluation at first — then point out the mistake to guide their subordinates. In this story, the process of the major's constructive criticism was explicit criticism in public—more explicitness in private—implicitness in private. The action that the major leveraged the opportunity to promote, relating violation to career and other's view to motivate his subordinates obtained his subordinates' support and loyalty.

Story 2: Mrs. Hua was a workshop director in a state-owned pharmaceutical factory. In a hot summer, workers cannot bear the indoor high temperature, they took off their masks and opened windows regardless the regulations that all workers should wear protective clothing and keep windows closed to prevent dusk and flies. However, when the factory director noticed that, he was burst into anger and criticized Mrs. Hua.

(In the workshop, all workers noticed)

The factor director: (in a loud voice) how did you manage your workshop? Did you notice the quality of medicine? This is vitally important to people's life safety and health. If your workshop won't change, I'll deduct your wage next time".

Then, Mrs. Hua cried and committed her negligence apparently and let workers obey the rules.

The narrator (Mrs. Hua): I felt ashamed with tears on my face but I hidden unhappiness in my heart. I commit my mistake because of my negligence to manage and potentially threaten the quality of medicine production, but his criticism was so harsh that I lost my face in front of my workers, how can I lead them in future?

Three weeks later, Mrs. Hua noticed a TV news that the explosion of a chemical plant caused the great loss of the factory and water pollution due to the negligence of management. She suddenly realized that her negligence of work would bring the disastrous lost and accepted the director's harsh criticism from heart.

Analysis

Norms: At the beginning, Mrs. Hua might feel humiliated due to face losing for the factory director's blatant criticism in public (explicitness-message context; public place-visible spatial context), and she hidden her unhappiness in her heart without showing (respect to authority-relationship context). Then, she blamed herself and committed her mistake intrinsically when noticing the serious negative effects of negligence from TV news few weeks later (time for self-reflection - time context). Her supervisor helped Hua reinterpret the importance of her work in the process of accepting such painful constructive criticism.

Group boundaries: Subordinates in two different - level violated the pharmaceutical norms: workers in this workshop opened windows and took off their masks regardless pharmaceutical

requirements and the standard of safety production; Mrs. Hua (the workshop director) neglected her duty that she would have stopped workers' violation when noticing. The Reasons that the factory director blatantly criticized Hua in public (30 workers were in the workshop-visible spatial context) are as followed: First, Hua should be responsible for this incident because she failed to prevent the undisciplined group violation; second, the purpose of the publicly explicit criticism (explicitness-message context), for example, the factory director said to Hua: "If your workshop won't change, I'll deduct your wage next time", was not only to call for her responsibility, but also indirectly gave warning to the undisciplined workers; third, this incident may cause the great potential loss for medicine quality and personal safety if the factory director did not stop their violation on time. Members in this factory held shared understanding of the pharmaceutical production process since the factory established, and the factory director always indirectly reminded them in the past. However, when the group violation happened, the factory director had to explicitly address pharmaceutical requirements and the safety production standard in the workshop (explicitness-message context) in order to re-strengthen shared understanding for all members.

Group bonds: Though the factory director considered that workers in this workshop were the direct violators and Mrs. Hua was the indirect violator in this incident, he still gave explicit criticism to Hua. "It is tough for the middle-level supervisor in a state- owned company," explained Mrs. Hua, "As the dean, I have to receive such blatant criticism from the upper-level supervisor when my workers make mistakes or violate norms, but they never experienced such severe criticism from the factory director." While this criticism in public is too harsh, the factory director protected Hua and her workers from potential negative effect and finally prevented this

group violation (protection-relationship context). This finding is accord with previous research that Chinese supervisor shows care and protection toward subordinates to transmit affective attachment (Gan Qing) (Yang, 1994).

Speech norms: People in the high communication context, such as Chinese and Japanese keep group harmony and avoid interpersonal conflict at all costs (Davis & Ikeno, 2002; Chen, 1995). However, the factory director's publicly explicit criticism is contrary to this norm: when noticing the negative influence of group violation or emergency happened, he could not maintain the face-saving and interpersonal harmony (losing face-relationship context), but had to use shaming to Mrs. Hua in front of her workers trigger her sense of guilt and shame of group members, and to warn bad influence of their violation. Hua said: "when he shouted at me in front of my workers, I'm unhappy but I can't show on my face (respect to authority-invisible spatial context; hierarchy-invisible spatial context). After watching the news of chemical plant explosion, I'm sincerely convinced by his words, I'll blame myself if there is some problem of the medicine quality in my workshop (time for self-reflection-time context)". The plant director's harsh criticism successfully changed the bad situation – Mrs. Hua was strictly to her work and group members adhered pharmaceutical production standard.

4.2. When noticing subordinate(s) make work-related mistake during work/after work, leaders use criticism during the process of completing a task. Two stories below illustrate this approach.

Story 3: Mr. Sun is an engineer in the railway bureau, charging the maintenance of train and track. One day, while the group leader found that Mr. Sun had forgotten to check the screws of one coach, he did not remind him at once.

In the next morning meeting (18 engineers were there).

The group leader: (glanced at Mr. Sun) someone forgot to check screws of one coach in K137 (the number of a train) yesterday afternoon, he shouldn't make such mistake. This work requires high responsibility; we are responsible for the security of people, we need to check each screw of the train.

The narrator (Mr. Sun): the leader's criticism is right, and he didn't point my name. When I see a screw, or see him, I pay more attention on checking. I worked with him for twelve years and knew him very much. In the daily work, he is just to each group member and strict to work, so I accept his words, and respect him.

Analysis

Norms: Mr. Sun identified this work feedback was constructive for the two focal points: a. offering him criticism anonymously toward his carelessness in public for face-saving (implicitness-message context; face-saving-relationship context), e.g. ...in the meeting, the group leader glanced at Mr. Sun while saying: "Someone forgot to check screws of one coach, K137 yesterday afternoon ..."; b. showing significance of task, e.g. "This work requires high responsibility; we are responsible for the security of people". When perceiving the genuine affection and constructive feedback of his performance from the supervisor (affection-relationship context), Mr. Sun worked harder and became more loyalty to him (respect to authority-relationship context; hierarchy-invisible spatial context).

Group boundaries: The train mechanical engineer is different from other professions, requiring high responsibility and strictness that careless checking of one small screw relates lives of people. In fact, it is common that an experienced engineer occasionally forgets to check some small screws of the train or the track. When the group leader noticed that Mr. Sun failed to check

one coach yesterday, he did not remind him directly but criticize the negligence anonymously in the group meeting (implicitness-message context; public place-visible spatial context). The purpose of providing a public criticism without mentioning Mr. Sun's name was as followed: first, the group leader wanted to raise all group members' attention to avoid the negligence; second, if he did not remind his subordinate's carelessness, its potential consequence would be disastrous —damaging the group boundary; third, Mr. Sun regretted for his serious carelessness from the implicit message (glanced at him while saying the incident) conveyed by his leader (implicitness-message context), though the group leader did not mention his name. In this process, the criticism dynamics were rich, including both explicit information (pointing out one's negligence anonymously in public) and implicit message (glanced at Mr. Sun while saying) that warned all mechanical engineers from negligence and maintained the self-esteem of the violator.

Group bonds: In the state-owned organization, supervisors invariably use a moderate way to correct their subordinates' fault or adjust their ways of working, such as anonymous criticize someone in public, retail the third party's (e.g., the upper supervisor or coworkers-indirect message context) point of view to maintain interpersonal harmony and expect the violator's introspection. For this reason, the group leader mentioned one subordinate's fault anonymously in the group meeting in order to protect Mr. Sun from peers' mock or contempt (protection-relationship context), and warn other group members to be strict to their work. Meanwhile, group members captured the subtle message, such as information about the violator, policy and organization orientation from the high context communication.

Speech norm: The group leader used eye contact to Mr. Sun to convey his dissatisfaction toward his negligence, point his fault anonymously as well as give warning to all members. Two

channels, implicit eye contact (implicitness-message context) and explicit public reminding (public place-visible spatial context) transmitted message to Mr. Sun and his coworkers the importance of their work. All group members perceived that Mr. Sun might be the violator based on the explicit information of “one coach in K137” which several engineers charged (including Mr. Sun), but all of them kept silence due to their shared understanding of face-saving (interpersonal harmony-relationship context). In addition, the way that public criticizing one’s fault anonymously is consistent with the way the director used in story 4 shows that the middle-level supervisor in the state-owned organization get used to this approach to transfer information in public.

Story 4: Mr. Wu is an accountant in a state owned company. When the director (Wu’s supervisor) made a financial report to the manager, the manager found one mistake of account that Wu made.

(In the group meeting)

The director: this report is successful, but there exists some minor problem we need to improve, such as some inconsistency between the company account book and bank account⁴ because of the delayed account confirmation, or unsmooth communication with the bank accounting. I hope all departments can support and cooperate to solve this problem.

The narrator (Mr. Wu): the meaning the director conveyed is that I didn’t do a good job, although he didn’t say explicitly. One feature of the state-owned company is that the middle level supervisor seldom criticizes his/her subordinate harshly in public, but point out one’s fault in a subtle way.

⁴ The inconsistency between the company account book and bank account that the director mentioned means that the business check was in the bank but the bank clerk did not confirm on time.

After that, Mr. Wu paid more attention to the inconsistency of the account; the director helped him communicate each department and bank accountant to reduce the uncertainty.

The narrator (Mr. Wu): my director and I have a harmonious working relationship, he always focuses on the issue rather than a person, and he is nice to me. We trust each other.

Two years later, when the director was promoted to be a vice manager in another state-owned enterprise, he took Mr. Wu as his assistant.

Analysis

Norms: Mr. Wu considered the public feedback is constructive based on the contextual information of affirming and encouragement, e.g. “this report is successful”, as well as suggestion for improvement, e.g. “there exists some minor problem we need to improve, ... I hope all departments can support and cooperate to solve this problem”. Because Chinese people are more concern about face issues than Westerners, in this story, Mr. Wu maintained his self-esteem by his director not mentioning his name in front of coworkers. What’s more, the support that the director provided, e.g. “I hope all departments can support and cooperate to solve this problem”, improved Mr. Wu’s work efficiency and their mutual trust.

Group boundaries: The director gave an implicit feedback to Mr. Wu’s work mistake in public (public place-visible spatial context): he confirmed the work performance of all group members, then reported the upper supervisor’s evaluation that one mistake would hinder the progress of the task to indicate Mr. Wu’s negligence of work (implicitness-message context). At last, the director called for cooperation of each department to work it out. During this process, the director subtly changed Wu’s personal mistake to whole team members’ mistake that all workers should be responsible, further protected Mr. Wu from peers’ complain as well as guided the

future direction of whole team. In the high context communication (protection-relationship context), people with the shared understanding tend to relate their current experience with the same or similar past stimuli, such as the previous interactions with individuals (Bechky & Okhuysen, 2011). In this story, Mr. Wu evaluated the quality of the criticism from four aspects: first, the director kept Wu's face by pointing out his fault anonymously (face-saving - relationship context); second, he kept long time harmonious relationship and mutual trust with his director (interpersonal harmony - relationship context); third, the director helped Wu cooperate and communicate with other department (support - relationship context); fourth, the director always adhered the work policy of focusing on the issue rather than person. Thus, Mr. Wu considered this public implicit criticism was effective.

Group bonds: The director's anonymous criticism in public made it effective to call for all group members to cooperate who were ultimately responsible to the issue of accounting inconsistency, albeit Mr. Wu is the offender ostensibly. He tried to convey the negative work feedback to Mr. Wu in an implicit way and gave alarm to his negligence (implicitness-message context). Meanwhile, he helped Mr. Wu reduce the accounting flaw via communicating with the bank clerk and units. Uniting the power of all members to solve this problem (support - relationship context), the director protected Wu from the upper supervisor and his coworkers' blaming (protection - relationship context), and strengthen their team spirit.

Group speech: the process that the director gave the work feedback was confirming the task of all group members, but later raised the issue of accounting flaw in public. This approach that the director used is similar with the way the major used for the lieutenant and the sergeant in story 1. However, the director made anonymous criticism in public by relating the third party's

(the upper supervisor's suggestion) evaluation of this task (indirectness-message context) to convey the subtle message to Mr. Wu (implicitness-message context), and provided the reasonable explanation for his mistake (reducing uncertainty-message context). In this process, only Mr. Wu and his director with the shared understanding and tacit common ground knew the implicit message conveyed in the publicly anonymous criticism.

4.3. When noticing the performance of subordinate(s) is below expectation during work/after work, leaders use criticism during the process of completing a task. One story below illustrates this approach.

Story 5: Mr. Cheng is in charge of the preparation for the conference. He booked 120 bunches of flowers for 120 people who will get award on that day. In the director's office, Cheng told him that the wholesale price for each bouquet is 60 RMB.

The director: I thought each is 30-40 RMB. (crossing his arms on his chest)

(Cheng felt the director didn't understand him)

Cheng: that's impossible.

(Silence about ten seconds)

The director: the price is not so good.

Cheng: the supplier gave me the lowest price. It's difficult to bargain again and the supplier will lose a lot.

The director: why you didn't report me before booking? (Talking in a high volume) You trapped yourself. Actually, in the conference, people who get personal reward need flowers but people who get group reward don't need flowers. Cut down 40 bunches.

(Cheng felt unhappy)

The director: don't be embarrassed, we are buyers, the supplier would try his best to satisfy the buyers.

Finally, Cheng booked 80 bunches successfully.

Analysis

Norms: The director criticized Mr. Cheng for his performance below expectation at work, e.g. "I thought each is 30-40 RMB", "it's too expensive", "why you didn't report me before booking? You trapped yourself". On the other hand, Cheng felt unhappy because his supervisor did not understand him and he broke the promise for the flower supplier. However, when the director helped Cheng reinterpret his work content and provided ways to improve his performance, such as "don't be embarrassed, we are buyers, the supplier would try his best to satisfy the buyers", Cheng found this task was not difficult than he thought and applied the approach in future work. Mr. Cheng considered the criticism was constructive for three key points: a. this conversation was happened in a private place (the director's office); b. their work relationship lasted six years; c. they were very familiar.

Group boundaries: At the beginning, Mr. Cheng resisted the director's criticism because the supervisor did not notice the difficulty of this task and what Cheng concerning about – Mr. Cheng already made a promise to the flower supplier who already prepared 120 bunches of lilies. The young subordinate felt unhappy that he was reluctant to break the promise with the supplier, whereas the director attributed Cheng's dilemma to no prior communication with him. When the conflict of understanding for the issue happened between two interlocutors, the director provided the explanation of the work content by connecting himself and Cheng together ("we are buyer, the supplier would try his best to satisfy the buyer") and made the guidance to improve his work

method. At last, Mr. Cheng confirmed the director's constructive criticism through four criteria: first, this conversation was happened in the director's office (private place-visible spatial context) which Chinese interlocutors are more favorable; second, their working relationship lasted for six years (interpersonal harmony-relationship context); third, the director made the guidance toward Cheng's work (improvement of work-explicit message context); fourth, they are very familiar (trust-relationship context).

Group bonds: The director expressed negative feedback with Cheng in a private place (his office-visible spatial context) that his performance failed to meet the supervisor's expectation, the purpose of which was to reconcile their different views of work rather than blaming his subordinate's improper behavior. For six years of work relationship, the director has treated Mr. Cheng sincerely and he captured this chance to train Cheng to be more capable. This long-term harmony interpersonal relationship between supervisor and subordinate has mentioned in story 1 and 3. In the Chinese work context, the relationship between supervisor and subordinate is more beyond work, even deeply involved in the private life (Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997). Just as Cheng said: "I work with my director for a long time, we know each other and I visited his family several times. His criticism is constructive, because he reminds me how to do my work. His instruction always improves my performance, I'll follow him".

Speech norm: The director in this story used two channels of message to convey his meaning. First, he shifted his implicit verbal message with Cheng to more explicit. The director said "I thought each is 30-40 RMB" that meant the flower price was too high that Cheng spent more than his expectation (indirectness-message context). However, perceiving his supervisor's incomprehension, Mr. Cheng explicitly showed his unwillingness, "That's impossible".

Received undesired response, the director changed his tone to an explicit way: “It’s too expensive (explicitness-message context)”. When Mr. Cheng continued to persist in his views by explaining “the supplier gave me the lowest price. It’s difficult to bargain again and the supplier will lose a lot”, the director clearly shifted his tone to more explicit that intended to express his dissatisfaction toward Cheng’s action as well as provide instruction for further work. Perceiving Cheng’s unhappiness, this supervisor continued to comfort him by offering the work approach. The director conveyed some nonverbal message to express his discontent, such as “crossing his arms on his chest”, “silence about ten seconds”, and “talking in a high volume” (physical distance-spatial context). In the high communication context, these “silent languages” are not empty, but bear the meaning to effect on the content and manner of interaction (Hall, 1989). The director’s physical expression, silence and loud voice (implicitness-message context) indicated his disagreement with what Mr. Cheng did.

In this dynamic communication, the director initially gave implicit hint to guide Cheng to figure things out. When Cheng failed to capture the message, the director tried to express his dissatisfaction explicitly. As Cheng still insisted on his view, the director shifted his tone to a more explicit way by detailed criticizing his unfavorable action. This captures the degree of criticism between the director and his subordinate in a private place of a public institution—if the implicit message does not work in a given time, the supervisor will shift to an explicit way to adjust the subordinate’s behavior to meet his expectation.

4.4. A negative example: is the criticism that interlocutors consider effective really constructive?

Story 6: Kai is an office clerk in the National development and reform commission. One time, he received an expensive gift (this gift costs nearly 4000 RMB) from his customer. Half a

year later, the director (Kai's supervisor) occasionally knew Kai's inappropriate activity with one supplier.

In the public office (8-10 people were there)

The director: I heard someone used the business partnership to receive private gift, he/she violated the provision that prohibits to get gift or property from customers or suppliers. The upper supervisors investigate such case strictly, everybody pays attention.

The narrator (Mr. Kai): the director knew my activity, but he didn't criticized me in front of others. It's common that clerks from public institution receive gifts or bonus from their business partners. My supervisor didn't point my name and saved my face. I'll never make such mistake.

Analysis

Norms: This criticism is not constructive for the following reasons: first, that Mr. Kai accepted personal gift by using his position and power seriously damaged the interest and image of the organization; second, the director's mild criticism did not protect Mr. Kai, but covered his wrongdoing and deteriorated the work environment. In this case, it seems incomprehensible why the director just gave the mild criticism on Kai's serious violation (the gift he accepted is worth of nearly 4000 RMB), but one crucial explanation is that the climate of this public institution is more tolerable of value securities exchanging. Further, Kai appreciated his director for "not point his name and save his face" in front of his coworkers, but this behavior was forbidden in the organization. Albeit Mr. Kai considered this feedback was effective to prevent his future misbehavior and save face, it was destructive which undermined the organizational development and management in a long time. Therefore, this case vividly demonstrates a story of seemingly constructive criticism but destructive in nature.

Group boundaries: Mr. Kai violated the organizational norm for receiving an expensive gift worth 4000 RMB. According to the law, the economic activity that a state personnel accepts rebates, fees, or presents which are more than 5000 RMB from one's customer is the crime of bribery. Although Kai understood the provision of non-property charge from customers/partners, he still ignored the rule and detriment the group boundaries for personal gain. By crossing the boundaries between two groups—in which the office clerk used his power to make damage to the organization—and the outside— Kai received bribe from his partner of another organization (i.e., violate group boundary crossing in another direction). The introduction of the rule set that the director made was an explicit message to the violator and others avoiding such situation in the future.

Group bonds: The story that the director gave a mild criticism (public criticism without mentioning his name-implicit message & visible spatial context) toward Mr. Kai's serious violation indicated the public institutional atmosphere spawned the activity of value securities exchanging where people take such activity for granted. Just as Mr. Kai said, "it's common that clerks from the public institution receive gifts or bonus from their business partners", the supervisor turned a blind eye to deal with such incident to maintain the interpersonal harmony (strengthen relationship-relationship context). Even though the subordinate made a big mistake, his/her supervisor would provide a anonymous criticism in public or gave a mild communication in private to let the offender to introspect. Their self-centered thinking decremented the development of organization and organizational atmosphere, which in turn, hindered their personal growth in a long term.

Speech norm: The director gave anonymous criticism in public (implicit message and

visible spatial context) toward the violation of Mr. Kai and indicated the seriousness of such incident from the third party's view (the upper supervisor paid high attention to bribe) to warn all members including Mr. Kai. The director's action is similar to the way the supervisor treated negligence of Mr. Sun in story 3 and Mr. Wu in story 4 that he pointed out the work mistake in front of all group members without mentioning violator's name. However, it is noticing that the director gave the mild criticism to Kai's serious violation. Alternative explanation is that the relationship between supervisors and subordinates is very subtle. That is, if the subordinate has good relationship with his/her director, the director will give a mild anonymous criticism to him/her in public or communicate with him/her in private (strengthen relationship-relationship context). If the director doesn't like this subordinate who has a powerful background or is capable of his/her work (implicitness- message context), the director will give him/her a mild anonymous criticism in public because he cannot control the whole situation (maintain interpersonal harmony-relationship context). Therefore, the level of criticism that the director gave to a subordinate was somewhat based on their relationship and the background information of the subordinate.

5. Case Summary

Table 3 summarizes the way to mix the context of message and space to transmit meaning across the cases analyzed. Concentrating on the explicitness of the message, and the place where communicators impart the message of constructive criticism, we can see that constructive criticism can be more or less explicit in the message context, at the same time, be communicated in public (i.e., the public office, the meeting, the conference or peers/coworkers watching) or private spatial context (i.e., the supervisor's office, personal call, email, the place without the

third party noticing). The horizontal axis of Table 3 depicts the message context that items more to the left represent more implicit message, and the items on the right for more explicit message. The vertical axis shows whether communicators between interlocutors are dependent on the spatial context, wherein items more to the top mean more public place and vice versa for the more private place. Combining the message and spatial context, supervisors provide different types of constructive criticism, and subordinates judge whether it is acceptable or not. Thus, the mix of message and spatial context portrays the degree of constructive criticism.

According to the constructs that the analysis has demonstrated, the three degrees of constructive criticism are respectively marked with the black triangle (▲), black circle (●) or black square (■). Subordinates response toward constructive criticism that their supervisor gave are labeled by check mark (☑) respectively. Each of the cases is illustrated in an ordinal fashion, so one can see how the constructive criticism is changed from implicitness to explicitness in story 5 that ⑤ the director initially expressed his disagreement toward Mr. Cheng's booking flowers in an indirect way: "I thought each is 30-40 RMB" and "the price is not so good" in his office (express his unsatisfaction in a subtle way in private); they kept silence for ten seconds. When he realized that Mr. Cheng failed to capture his implicit message and insisted on his own action, ⑤ he changed his tone into an explicit way that harshly criticizing his subordinate action (harshly criticize in private). Likewise, one can see how the place of constructive criticism is changed across time in story 1 that ① the major stopped Wen and the sergeant's drinking during the night shift in the public office (moderately criticize in public), and then ① took them in his office, giving severe criticism for their violation in the army (harshly criticize in private). The degree of constructive criticism that supervisors offer and subordinates

evaluate is dependent on the spatial context as well as the message context. The spatial context is captured vertically in Table 3 to see how place and other visible/invisible cues changing in order to give the norm violator a chance to be aware of what the implicit meaning embedded in the private place, its location is the bottom left quadrant of the matrix. Communicators use the practice of public context to transmit the preprogrammed shared understanding to the norm violator in an implicit way (i.e., glanced at Mr. Sun in the meeting due to his violation) and to other coworkers for the purpose of avoiding such violation, its location is the upper left quadrant; or their public activities are intended to gave alarm to all workers in an explicit way, its location is the upper right quadrant of the matrix. It is noticing that four items positioned in the middle of the matrix, these items sharing the same degree of constructive criticism, indicate the middle degree across the multiple locations of the visible and invisible spatial context (private spatial cues vs. public place spatial cues) and the message context (implicit vs. explicit).

The low degree of constructive criticism. When a feedback provider talks about one's mistake, he/she chooses a private place and tries to send the implicit message with hidden meaning or round to the point for one's realization of his mistake. In story 5, the action that the director crossed his arms and mentioned the high price of flowers was to indicate that Cheng's action was below his expectation and hoped him get introspection. In most work settings, subordinates can capture the subtle meaning of their supervisors' implicit message, and adapt their behavior in accord with what supervisors expect. However, in story 5, because of Mr. Cheng's resistance, the director had to give up his implicit instruction. Another low degree of constructive criticism is gently reminding one's minor mistake in a subtle way in public, such as knocking the worker's table in the public office when noticing him sleeping during work or

staring at the subordinate in front of coworkers for his delay completion of the task. In story 3, the group leader sent the implicit signal to Mr. Sun (glanced at him) in the meeting for his negligence of checking the screws of the train. The shared understanding between the interlocutors enhances the effectiveness of the nonverbal message transmission, and thus the space-message reliance activity is a stronger form of context-reliance.

The middle degree of constructive criticism. Table 3 shows four types of constructive criticism of this degree, which are a bit more complex, crossing different dimensions of spatial context (private spatial cues vs. public spatial cues) and message context (implicit vs. explicit). First, supervisors moderately criticize subordinates in a private way, for instance, a department manager points out his follower's mistake in the corridor where no third party was watching, or a director adjusts the way of his worker working via the personal email. In story 1, the major set his experience as example to indirectly instruct Mr. Wen and the sergeant in his office. Similarly, in story 4, when Mr. Cheng resisted to accept the implicit suggestion, the director changed his tone to the explicit way – blaming his action in a high volume in a private room. The two stories share the common ground that both supervisors choose the private way and decode the relative obscure or misunderstood message to the clear and direct message. Second, supervisors anonymously criticize subordinates' mistake in public. In story 3, the group leader mentioned the negligence of work in the group meeting anonymously but glanced at Mr. Sun; in story 4, the director raised the accounting mistake that Mr. Wu made without mentioning his name in the public office in order to protect the norm violator from discrimination or exclusion of coworkers as well as remind others to avoid such violation. Two stories share the similarities of anonymity and public. Third, supervisors gave moderate criticism toward subordinates' violator in public. In story 1, when

noticing the violation of Mr. Wen and the sergeant during the night shift in the army, the major stopped them in a rather moderate tone. It seems ambiguous that the major only gave a middle level of criticism toward their severe violation, however, the reason of offering the inconsistent criticism is that the major concerned about face-saving and maintained their self-esteem to the two violators in the public office where the video camera was recording, and then he brought them to a private place. Four, supervisors give intense criticism toward subordinates' mistake in emergency. It often happens in the urgent circumstances, such as approaching deadline for order delivery, the threat of production line, the pressure of the crucial task. In the army, the officer would severely criticize and strictly train soldiers if they are sluggish before an important military exercise. In story 2, the factory director blatantly criticized Mrs. Hua when noticing the threat of pharmaceutical production that her workers made. When the unexpected emergency happened, the factory director had no time to concern about the issue of face-saving and interpersonal harmony, he chose to intensely criticize the one who in charge of the workshop to prevent such incident happened. Though the non-reliance criticism (explicit and public) is harsh, most subordinates show their conformance to supervisor because task emergency mitigates their resistance toward the intense criticism in public.

The high degree of constructive criticism. Three types in this degree are showed in the right quadrant of the matrix. First, supervisors give harsh criticism toward subordinates' mistake in a private place. In story 1, after taking the two violators in a private office, the major harshly criticized Mr. Wen, and then criticized the sergeant in a more harsh tone for their drinking. The two subordinates accepted the harsh criticism from heart due to face-saving and sincere affection from the major. Similarly, the director switched his implicit tone to the explicit way toward Mr.

Cheng's rejection to his suggestion in story 5. The two stories similarly share the mix of explicitness and private. Second, supervisors direct criticized subordinates' work related mistake in front of coworkers. In story 2, because of her negligence of managing, Mrs. Hua had to apparently receive the harsh criticism from the factory director and committed her fault, but she cried in front of all subordinates. Her nonverbal behavior (tears) indicated she protested this criticism, just as Mrs. Hua said: "When he criticized my mistake in front of my workers, tears were on my face, because I had no face and I lost my self-esteem. But I'll hide my unhappiness in my heart without showing". Third, supervisors criticize subordinates' mistake by name in the meeting or at the conference. All subordinates in five stories expressed their strongly rejection to this degree because it ruins subordinates' dignity and self-esteem. One narrator, Mr. Wen said: "If he (the major) criticized my fault by pointing my name at the conference, I'll refuse without hesitation. He could not criticize me in front of my soldiers or my friends. Public criticism by pointing one's name is the highest level of criticism, and it truly tramples my dignity. I'll be extremely awkward and lose my face if everyone knows my mistake; I want to dig a hole for myself and I can't bear it". Thus, the last two types of non-reliance context activities are the weakest form of constructive criticism, which has unfavorable effect on subordinates work related behaviors.

(INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE)

6. Lessons from Constructive Criticism Stories

From the analysis of six stories above, our findings depict the process of constructive criticism toward norm violation in Chinese state-owned organizations and public institutions. In the following part, we discuss these findings with regard to the two research questions and

develop a set of propositions that suggest a process model of accepting constructive criticism from our data.

6.1. Constructive Criticism as Vehicle for Motivated Communication

Our first research question is how do subordinates evaluate the quality of constructive criticism from their supervisors in Chinese state-owned enterprises and public institutions? Our analysis suggest that people perceive the effectiveness of constructive criticism via the mutual understanding between supervisors and subordinates across time and consider it as a vehicle in the motivated communication process.

First, it is noting that across three types of norm violations (except for story 6 due to the destructive nature of the supervisor's criticism), providers used constructive criticism to resolve norm violations. Constructive criticism, we mean a kind of motivated communication to provide external views toward people's unpleasant behavior or act, interpret ways to enhance their underperformance, and express genuine interest and encouragement for their working effort. In the examples, all recipients finally improved their performance, or adjusted their work approach after receiving supervisors' feedback and committing their faults, although some of them (i.e., Mrs. Hua) might misunderstand or distort the purpose of the directors' criticism at the beginning. Zhang and colleagues (2011) proposed that constructive criticism is a significant acceptable instrument to socialize and correct behaviors of Chinese people. Research indicated that constructive criticism effectively promotes job performance and correction of behavior for Chinese subordinates (Leung et al., 2001). The present research shows that constructive criticism is effective to restrain norm violation.

Proposition 1: Constructive criticism copes with norm violation by behaviors guidance and

norm compliance.

Second, we observed that people would accept some painful constructive criticism that they were firstly rejected or reluctant to face, when they get mutual understanding with the feedback provider over time. Albeit some feedbacks may elicit negative feelings, i.e., anger, shame, awkward, humiliation and frustrated (Zhang et al., 2011) which hinder the improvement of performance. Previous research indicates that Chinese are less likely to give negative evaluation toward supervisors' criticism (Leung et al., 2001) and are more tolerable or considerate after being criticized (Brockner, Chen, Mannix, Leung & Skarlicki., 2000). In story 2, Mrs. Hua felt embarrassment and ashamed at the beginning due to suffering the factory director's harsh criticism and losing face in front of her workers, and her tears showed the non-verbal disagreement or resistance toward such feedback. But Mrs. Hua finally recognized the importance of this constructive feedback and reached an agreement with the factory director three weeks later when stimulating by a TV news about the chemical explosion accident due to negligent management. Thus, people will build mutual shared understanding and common ground with their supervisors over a long period of time when they get self-introspection and consider the criticism as constructive from heart.

Proposition 2: Constructive criticism enhances the shared understanding and tacit common ground between norm violators and feedback providers in a long-term.

6.2. Four Contextual Components Mix in Constructive Criticism

Our second research question asks how subordinates judge the degree and understand the meaning of constructive criticism. Our findings suggest that subordinates stress and rely on the contextual components to understand and evaluate constructive criticism. Message, space,

relationship and time coexist and interpenetrate with each other in constructive criticism and effect as part of the constructive criticism. First, we observed examples of the concurrent use of indirect and implicit messages. In story 3, 4 and 5, supervisors talked round and round to the main point and used indirect language, metaphor, anonymity and eyes contact as part of constructive criticism, subordinates with the shared experiences could easily capture the subtle meanings that their superiors conveyed and further adapted work related behaviors in accord with their expectation. These phenomena are consistent with the previous document that Chinese and Japanese rely on more sophisticated and subtle styles to transmit messages (Hall & Hall, 1990). In the high communication context, people highly depend on the preprogrammed information and shared understanding between interlocutors in relationship, previous interaction, and the environment to send or interpret messages (Hall, 1989:101; Adair, Taylor & Tinsley, 2009). Thus, the shared understanding or common tacit ground embedded in the setting enhances people's understanding and acceptance constructive criticism.

Proposition 3a: Indirect and implicit messages in constructive criticism will facilitate the understanding and modify the behavior of people with a strong interdependent self-construal.

Second, we also observed examples of the concurrent use of explicit messages if the transmission of implicit message is hindered or does not work in the emergency situation. In story 1, 2, and 5, supervisors shifted the implicitness to explicitness when noticing subordinates failed to capture their subtle meaning, or provide direct and explicit feedback in emergency situations, such as drinking during night shift in the army and threat of medicine production. Similar results can be found in Cole's research (2015) that the Japanese master altered his instruction from implicit to explicit to short term American learners who lack of shared

understanding and common tacit ground in the learning process of dojo. In some cases, indirect and implicit information of message sometimes loses its effectiveness while communicators own same culture, long-term relationship and shared background. At this time, however, the directness and explicitness of message serves as an alternative in conveying constructive feedback.

Proposition 3b: If indirect and implicit messages fail to transmit, direct and explicit messages in constructive criticism will facilitate the understanding and modify the behavior of people with a strong interdependent self-construal.

Third, we also noticed examples of using visible and invisible spatial cues to convey constructive feedback. In story 3 and 5, supervisors used nonverbal cues, such as silence for ten seconds, crossing arms, talking in a high volume, and glancing at someone in order to convey their dissatisfaction toward their subordinates' inappropriate behaviors. Silent space indicates disagreement between interlocutors who maintain interpersonal harmony (Labra, 1976) and the volume/tone of speech as body language also means their disagreement. Our examples are consistent with the finding that Japanese with the interdependent self-construal give silence a certain meaning as a communicative action (Gudykunst et al., 1996). In addition, supervisors in story 1 and 5 chose private ways, (private room) to convey work related feedback whereas the factory director in story 2 blatantly criticized his subordinates with the high volume in the public place. In the Chinese context, private criticism is more favorable and effective to preserve one's reputation and save face, but public criticism is more frustrated and undesirable (Leung et al., 2001). Thus, visible and invisible spatial cues play crucial roles in understanding and acceptance of constructive feedback.

Proposition 4a: Spatial cues in constructive criticism will facilitate the understanding and modify the behavior of people with a strong interdependent self-construal.

Fourth, we observed examples of the use of space and message to convey information in the communication. In five stories (except the sixth story which describes a seemingly constructive but destructive criticism event), all participants enhanced their understanding and evaluated the extent of constructive criticism based on visible/invisible spatial cues (e.g., tone of voice, silence, body language, status, private room, meeting and public office) and implicit/explicit messages (e.g., intonation, ellipsis, talk round to the point, pointing one's fault anonymously and direct criticism). Further, supervisors in examples alter their style of message from implicitness to explicitness, and shift their place of feedback from publicity to privacy. These phenomena have been documented in Petress' (2000) research that people should carefully consider the privacy, tone, volume of constructive criticism while its message of content is crucially important. Therefore, the mix of space and message effects recipients' perception of constructive criticism.

Proposition 4b: Spatial-message mix will facilitate people with a strong interdependent self-construal judge the degree of constructive criticism and modify their behavior.

Fifth, we observed that people are capable to confirm the degree of constructive criticism and prefer to receive the low and middle degree of such feedback. In examples, informants categorized the degree of constructive criticism by visible spatial cues (private place with other spatial cues vs. public place with other spatial cues) and message cues (implicit vs. explicit). Specifically, subordinates consider the implicitly private criticism or the implicitly public criticism as the low degree of constructive criticism; the directly private criticism, the moderate explicitly public criticism or the emergent explicitly public criticism as the middle degree of

constructive criticism; the harsh explicitly private criticism or harsh explicitly public criticism as the high degree of constructive criticism. All informants evaluated the low and middle degree of criticism as constructive which truly increase their performance and work effort whereas Mrs. Hua (in story 2) was resistant to such high degree of feedbacks at the beginning and the criticism that Mr. Kai received from his supervisor was destructive in nature (in story 6). These evidence is consistency with Bandura and Cervone's (1986) argument that some people improve their effort but others behave oppositely after receiving criticism. Further, rich studies showed that individuals are likely to receive criticism as specific, fast delivered, considerate, and can be applied for general work (Ilgen, Mitchell, & Fredrickson, 1981; Liden & Mitchell, 1985). Thus, our data shows that the low and middle degree of constructive criticism in most work situation are more effective to guide people's work than the high degree of it.

Proposition 4c: The low/middle level of constructive criticism more copes with norm violation than the high level of constructive criticism.

Sixth, we observed examples of the use of relationship. In story 1, 3, 4 and 5, subordinates indicated their long-term friendly interpersonal relationship with superiors, and supported the way of saving face and maintaining relation harmony in the interaction of constructive criticism. What's more, many nonverbal cues whisper the background of interlocutors such as their age, gender, position, tenure, past experience and profession, which also indicate their long-term relationship and involvement of personal life. When subordinates have good relationship with supervisors, they will perceive the criticism as constructive, sincere, honest and kind (Lamborn et al., 1994), though the criticism sometimes is painful. On the other hand, subordinates show their deference and acceptance of supervisors' constructive criticism due to their high position

and authority (Leung et al., 2001). In the Chinese organization, supervisors play the role of father who take responsibility to protect and assist subordinates who are in dilemma while subordinates are awful and highly dependent on the authoritative supervisors (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang & Farh., 2004; Chen, Eberly, Chiang, Farh & Cheng., 2014). Both of them carefully cultivate their interpersonal relationship at work and personal life (Chen, Friedman, Yu, Fang & Lu., 2009). Thus, relationship context mitigates the resistance and promote the acceptance of constructive criticism.

Proposition 5: Interpersonal relationship will facilitate people with a strong interdependent self-construal receive constructive criticism and modify their behavior.

Seventh, we observed examples of time consuming. In story 2, participants reported that they accepted constructive criticism from heart after a long time (three weeks for Mr. Hua) though they were resistant and pretended to receive such painful feedback at the beginning. This phenomenon is consistent with Cole's (2015) prolonged process model of high context communication that describes how interlocutors vary and understand their communication and practice across time. Furthermore, participants in examples focus more on interpersonal relationship with their supervisors than task completion on time. According to Triandis (1995), polychronic individuals always have interdependent self-construal who tend to pay more attention to the time context, such as devoting time to engage interpersonal relationship, maintain personal harmony and strengthen the shared understanding. Thus, time context catalyzes the acceptance of constructive criticism.

Proposition 6: Time will facilitate people with a strong interdependent self-construal receive constructive criticism and modify their behavior.

6.3. The Process Model of Constructive Criticism

In order to identify these contextual components of constructive criticism, the evidence that high context communicators dynamically practice those factors in the interaction of feedback allows us to propose a process of constructive criticism (see Figure 1), which presents how these contextual factors are mixed across time in. As Figure 1 shows, norm violators in the high communication context judge the degree of constructive criticism via the context of message and spatial, and determine whether accept or not by relationship context. That is, if communicators have good interpersonal relationship or past pleasant interaction, violators will accept the feedback at once. Instead, if their relationship is ordinary or their previous interactive experience was unpleasant, violators will fail to reconcile the situation--apparently receive but resist it from heart. In this case, supervisors often provide guidance and give time to violators to introspect and interpret the meaning hidden in the criticism. Time giving is used to provide a chance for self-reflection and rebuilding shared understanding.

(INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE)

7.1. Theoretical Implications

Our results reconceptualize constructive criticism in two aspects within Chinese state-owned enterprises and public institutions. First, constructive criticism provides targets objective views toward their behavior to enhance self-growth, personal value and organization development, while previous studies (i.e., Petress, 2000; Leung et al., 2001) only mention that constructive criticism is for the purpose of personal task improvement and goal clarification. Second, constructive criticism manifests rich and complex forms in the Chinese context. Chinese employees not only advocate positive, sincere, considerate, trust-worthy feedbacks, they also

tend to receive the feedbacks which are apparently harsh, painful, frustrated but affectionate, caring and protective in nature, however, Westerners maintained that people are more likely to receive the feedbacks with efforts merit judgment and gentle tone to express genuineness, encouraging, affirming, supportive and to build confidence, rather than those awkward, harsh and stressful feedbacks (Lamborn et al., 1994). This research, explores the nature of constructive criticism in the Chinese context and features of Chinese employees in dealing with it.

While the communication context model maintains that high context communicators tend to use implicit message interacting with other within the same culture (Adair et al., 2009) and documents that Chinese are classically type of it (Kittler et al., 2011), this study attempts to investigate the work related constructive feedbacks in the Chinese organizations and findings are not always aligned with theory. The present research suggests that the high context communicators with interdependent self-construal not always rely on the implicit and indirect message context, but switch their conveying message into the explicit and direct form if they failed to get the shared understanding and consensus. A supervisor and his/her subordinate who work together for several years may explicitly express their different views toward work regardless their long time harmony relationship, common tacit ground and shared understanding. The integration of these aspects expands Hall's context theory that high context communicators with shared understanding or common tacit ground are likely to use implicit, subtle, indirect message to convey their meaning.

Combing Hall's communication context theory with constructive criticism research, we provide a process model of constructive criticism to explore how people evaluate and understand the meaning of constructive criticism, drawing on five cases of constructive criticism and the last

case as an example of destructive criticism within Chinese organizations. The emergent model that we propose shows the use of message and spatial context in the high communication context to evaluate the degree of constructive criticism, which include altering the explicitness of messages (direct and explicit vs. indirect and implicit) and visible/invisible spatial cues (private/public spatial cues). Based on this evaluation, targets relate its degree to relationship context (good relationship vs. ordinary relationship with feedback providers) to judge whether receive this feedback or not. We observe the frequency of time devoting to facilitate targets to form the shared understanding and reconcile their wrong actions based on constructive feedback.

7.2. Practical Implications

The most common blunders reported by Chinese managers and employees invariably seem to involve the work-related feedback. We have all heard the story of some employees' complain that they do not receive any feedback contingent to their performance from managers whereas their managers insist on having provided work-related feedback, or others are reluctant to receive supervisors' harsh or painful criticism. However, as we show here, constructive criticism in the Chinese work setting involves more than just verbal message that interlocutors engage in nonverbal message, space, interpersonal relationship and time investment. It necessitates understanding the extent of constructive criticism that employees are willing to receive and the role that contextual factors play in eliciting work-related feedback. Perhaps future work could assess the degree to which high context of constructive criticism that employees are likely to receive can effectively improve employees' work related outcomes.

The process model of constructive criticism advances our understanding and application of work-related feedback in the Chinese organizations by offering a theoretical framework and

instruments through which managers get self and other perceptions of constructive criticism patterns. Chinese managers need to apperceive and harness many sources of information, including invisible and indirect message (message context), attention to position, status and interpersonal relationship between interlocutors (relationship context), private/public place and physical cues (spatial context), time investing on communication and relationship (temporal context). Understanding many psychological and contextual factors that shape constructive criticism styles will promote both the expression and interpretation of managerial feedback in diverse workplace. In future work, researchers may want to examine the relationship between constructive criticism and four contextual factors, or the effects of four contextual factors in the association between constructive criticism and individuals' behavioral results.

7.3. Conclusion

We began this paper with questions: How do subordinates evaluate the quality of constructive criticism? How do subordinates judge the degree of constructive criticism? **Five** cases of constructive criticism and one case as the negative example between the middle level supervisors and subordinates in the Chinese state-owned enterprises and public institutions are the stories of interacting process for constructive criticism. These stories provide intriguing paths of constructive criticism and correction of subordinates' norm violation for scholars and managers alike in indigenous management and human resources management. The model of accepting process constructive criticism which contains four contextual factors (message, space, relationship and temporal context) contribute to explain subordinates' understanding and evaluation toward constructive criticism from the middle level supervisors, and it is worth of more exploration.

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Figure 1 The process of constructive criticism

Table 1**Descriptions of Participants in Six Stories**

Enterprise	Subordinate	Subordinate age	Subordinate position	Subordinate Education	Supervisor age	Supervisor gender	Supervisor position	Supervisor education	Working time with supervisor
Army (PI)	Mr. Wen	25	Engineer	College	38	M	Major	College	6 months
Pharmaceutical plant (SOE)	Mrs. Hua	35	Workshop director	College	55	M	Factory director	College	10 years
Railway Bureau (SOE)	Mr. Sun	40	Engineer	College	40	M	Group leader	College	12 years
Gage factory (SOE)	Mr. Wu	31	Accountant	MBA	42	M	Director	College	3 years
University (PI)	Mr. Cheng	31	Administrative Investment	Graduate	40	M	Director	PhD	6 years
Development and Reform Commission (PI)	Mr. Kai	31	evaluation consultant	MBA	40	M	Director	Post doctor	6 years

Table 2

Summary of Organizational Norm Violation Cases

Violator	Type of Violation	Degree of Threat	Intentionality of Violation	Type of Threat	Timing to give feedback	Resolution
Mr. Wen and the sergeant	Rules violation	Potentially Egregious	Purposeful disregard (due to unresisting to wine)	Army (Individual Level): potential threats to security	During work	Compliance with norms
Mrs. Hua and workers	Rules violation	Egregious	Mrs. Hua—unintentional (due to negligence) Workers--purposeful disregard (due to the high temperature in the workshop)	Pharmaceutical company (Group Level): low quality of medicine	During work	Compliance with norms Self-introspection for three weeks
Mr. Sun	Making mistake	Potentially Egregious	Unintentional (due to negligence)	Train (Group Level): potential threats to security	After work	Compliance with norms
Mr. Wu	Making mistake	Middle	Unintentional (due to difficult to communicate with the bank)	Department (Group Level): vulnerable to finish the whole task	During work	Changing the way of working
Mr. Cheng	Performance below expectation	Middle	Unintentional (due to lack of awareness)	Conference (Group Level): wasting money and resources	During work	Changing the way of working
Mr. Kai	Rules violation	Very egregious	Purposeful disregard(due to unresisting to money)	Department (Group Level): greatly damaging group climate, interest and reputation	After work	Compliance with norms

①-⑤ tory 1 to 5

▲ Low Degree of CC

● Middle Degree of CC

■ High Degree of CC

✓ Accept ✕ Refuse

Table 3 Message and Spatial Context Mixing – Degree of Constructive Criticism

		Message Context	
		Implicit	Explicit
Spatial Context	Public spatial cues	<p>▲ Gently remind one's minor mistake in public (✓) (i.e., ③ The group leader sent the implicit signal of glancing at Mr. Sun for his violation in the meeting)</p> <p>● Intensely criticize one's mistake in emergency (✓) (i.e. ② The factory director blatantly criticized loudly Mrs. Hua when noticing the threat of pharmaceutical production)</p> <p>● Moderately criticize in public (✓) (i.e., ① The major stopped Wen and the sergeant's behavior of drinking in the army in the public office)</p> <p>● Anonymously criticize one's mistake in public (✓) (i.e., ③④ The director mentioned the mistake/violation of the Subordinates without pointing out his name in the public office or the meeting.)</p>	<p>■ Criticize one's mistake by name in the meeting or at the conference (✕) (i.e., ①-⑤ All subordinates of five stories rejected this degree.</p> <p>■ Directly criticize one's mistake in front of coworkers. (i.e., ② Mrs. Hua hidden her unhappiness in her heart and cried.</p>
	Private spatial cues	<p>● Moderately criticize in private (✓) (i.e., ① The major set himself as example to warn Mr. Wen and the sergerant; ④ The director blamed Mr. Cheng not report the price of flower before booking in a high volume in his office.</p> <p>▲ Communicate toward one's mistake by words with hidden meaning in private (✓) (i.e., ⑤ The director crossed his arms and expressed his unsatisfaction toward Mr. Cheng's booking flowers with silence or by saying: "I thought each is 30-40 RMB", "The price is not good" in his office. Interlocutors kept silence about ten seconds</p>	<p>■ Harshly criticize in private (✓) (i.e., ① The major gave Wen and the sergeant severe criticism in his office for their drinking on work; ⑤ The director harshly criticized Mr. Cheng loudly for not reporting before booking flowers.</p>