Social persuasion and electronic performance monitoring

A qualitative study of feedback and self-efficacy in call centers

André Kårfors
Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the informants for sharing their personal thoughts and experiences so candidly. I am equally indebted to my supervisor, Konstantin Lampou, for his sage advice and social persuasion. Thank you.

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Abstract

Electronic performance monitoring (EPM) has long been associated with an array of negative effects, one of which is decreased employee self-efficacy, an essential determinant of human agency and workplace success. The negative discourse of control and discipline dominating the research field fails to account for the role of performance feedback, an integral component of EPM and part of an alternative discourse focusing on employee development. While feedback has been shown to ameliorate the negative impact of EPM, its effect on self-efficacy remains unclear. Therefore, this study investigates how employees subjected to EPM perceive and experience social persuasion – feedback aimed at increasing self-efficacy – using semi-structured interviews (with 10 customer service agents from as many call centers) and theoretical thematic analysis.

The findings suggest that social persuasion can mitigate the efficacy-depleting effects of EPM, and that a mixture of positive and negative feedback is particularly conducive to successful persuasion. Moreover, the conflict between management’s predilection for quantitative performance criteria and employees’ qualitatively oriented conceptions of service quality is found to be a key issue. Based on these findings, it is argued that the heavy emphasis on positive feedback found in extant literature on EPM and self-efficacy is potentially misleading, as is the dominance of the control and discipline discourse. Finally, it is argued that social persuasion may ameliorate the quantitative-qualitative conflict, and that the potential of social persuasion is particularly high in call centers, where low self-efficacy levels are likely to be the norm.

Keywords: electronic performance monitoring, feedback, social persuasion, self-efficacy
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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The use of electronic performance monitoring (EPM) allowing organizations "to collect, store, analyze, and report employee performance" by electronic means (Neber & Tatum, 1993, p. 509) began in the early 1980s and has grown extensively throughout the years; it immediately became a contentious subject (Aiello, 1993; Wells, Moorman & Werner, 2007). While proponents emphasized benefits such as employee development, service quality assurance and increased productivity (see Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989; Sarpong & Rees, 2014), critics were quick to observe an array of negative effects on monitored employees; these include high stress levels, increased perceived managerial control, an overemphasis on quantitative performance criteria, and a commensurate decrease in job satisfaction (Irving, Higgins & Safayeni, 1986; Stanton, 2000); anxiety, depression and anger (Smith, Carayon, Sanders, Lim & LeGrande, 2002); decreased well-being (Holman, Chissick & Totterdell, 2002; Rose & Wright, 2005); and reduced organizational commitment (Wells et al., 2007).

Indeed, the ominous labels of Taylorism (Gregory & Nussbaum, 1982), big brother (Sarpong & Rees, 2014), satanic mills (Kinnie, Hutchinson & Purcell, 2000), and panopticon (Fernie & Metcalf, 1998) have all been used to characterize EPM and the various organizational contexts in which it has been implemented. Recently, a direct link was established between EPM and reduced self-efficacy (see Jeske & Santuzzi, 2015), the latter defined as a "belief in one's ability to perform a particular task" (Karl, O'Leary-Kelly & Martocchio, 1993, p. 380), seemingly lending credence to the assumption that EPM is an inherently threatening and pernicious phenomenon (see Holman et al., 2002). This focus on the negative influence of EPM on employees, grounded in a discourse of control and discipline (Sewell, Barker & Nyvall, 2011), has received the lion's share of researchers' attention (Perkins, 2013); correspondingly, the other dimension of EPM – drawing instead upon a discourse of employee development (Wells et al., 2007) – has received less attention.

In essence, this alternative discourse emphasizes the constructive potential in providing performance feedback to employees, based on the data generated through the EPM system; importantly, one of its alleged functions is to mitigate the above-
mentioned negative effects (Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989), which, in some instances, has been empirically validated. For example, Holman et al. (2002) found that positive feedback increased job satisfaction and decreased emotional exhaustion; similarly, Wells et al. (2007) observed increases in employee commitment and perceived fairness of the monitoring system when management emphasized the feedback dimension of EPM.

Given that the concept of self-efficacy is an essential predictor of work performance and success (see Miraglia, Cenciotti, Alessandri & Borgogni, 2017), the prospect of utilizing the feedback mechanism of EPM to increase employee self-efficacy, that is, using social persuasion to strengthen people's beliefs "that they possess the capabilities to master given tasks" (Bandura, 1997, p. 101) and increase their "confidence in rising to address workplace challenges" (Dimotakis, Maurer & Mitchell, 2017, p. 1516), is both theoretically and practically relevant, especially in the context of EPM, which has been known to reduce self-efficacy (see Jeske & Santuzzi, 2015). This is the topic of the present study, which is based on semi-structured interviews with customer service agents in call centers – a particularly appropriate empirical setting by virtue of the pervasiveness of EPM commonly found in this context (see Holman et al., 2002; Sewell et al., 2011).

1.2 Research problem

The two dimensions of EPM outlined above – control/discipline and development – reveal an interesting dynamic of conflicting forces. On the one hand, EPM reduces self-efficacy (Jeske & Santuzzi, 2015); on the other hand, the provision of performance feedback, which has been shown to mitigate several negative effects of EPM (for example, see Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989; Holman et al., 2002), may well increase self-efficacy following successful social persuasion (Bandura, 1994, 1997). Interestingly, Jeske and Santuzzi (2015) found no significant effects of performance feedback on perceived self-efficacy in their study, which contradicts previous findings attesting to the mitigating potential of EPM-based feedback. As shown in the upcoming literature review, however, the authors' superficial surveys measuring general self-efficacy combined with their quantitative method of analysis (see Jeske & Santuzzi, 2015) arguably render an in-depth (i.e., a more detailed and exact [Flick, 2009: 134]) understanding of this finding unattainable, further motivating the present study into this insufficiently researched area.
Moreover, the research design to which Jeske and Santuzzi (2015) adhered reflects a predilection for quantitative methods and general, non-specific measures of key concepts in EPM research (see Stanton, 2000; Holman et al., 2002); against this backdrop, additional insights into the current topic necessitate and justify qualitative research methods – such as those adopted herein.

In addition to the aforementioned appropriateness of studying said topic in a call center environment (see Holman et al., 2002; Sewell et al., 2011), the observation that call center monitoring “is predominantly introduced to find and detect fault” (Ball & Margulis, 2011, p. 119) makes this empirical setting particularly interesting, for it alludes to the potential preponderance of the control discourse of EPM. Thus, it would appear as if the process of social persuasion is especially challenging in this empirical context.

1.3 Research question

Having identified the conflicting discourses of EPM and the dearth of qualitative research into this topic, this study is guided by the following research question:

How do customer service agents perceive and experience social persuasion when subjected to electronic performance monitoring?

1.4 Aim

The present study aspires to investigate the concept of social persuasion in an empirical setting permeated by EPM. More specifically, the aim is to conduct semi-structured interviews with customer service agents subjected to EPM and to use theoretical thematic analysis to arrive at a deeper understanding of the relationship between performance feedback and self-efficacy in an essentially efficacy-depleting organizational context.

1.5 Contribution

First, by focusing on social persuasion and self-efficacy, this study complements existing EPM literature in which the effects of feedback on other variables, such as job satisfaction (e.g., Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989), well-being (e.g., Holman et al., 2002) and organizational commitment (Wells et al., 2007), have been studied. Second, it addresses Stanton’s (2000, p. 108) call for more qualitative research into workers' personal viewpoints; it may thus uncover "interesting and worthwhile
insights into the psychological reality of monitored employees”. Third, in utilizing key concepts of social cognitive theory (see Bandura, 1997), this study contributes to psychological research by applying these constructs to a particular empirical context and investigating their practical potential and functionality; this leads to the fourth and final contribution, namely that made to managers that have either implemented or are considering to implement EPM. The findings of the present study might assist practitioners in configuring the EPM system and managing the feedback process.

1.6 Outline

Having briefly introduced the study, the second chapter reviews extant literature on the key concepts of self-efficacy, social persuasion and EPM, and derives the conceptual framework used in data generation and analysis. The third chapter describes the empirical setting (i.e., the call center environment) and purposive selection of informants, the ideographic ontology and interpretivist epistemology permeating the study, and the use of semi-structured interviews and theoretical thematic analysis in data generation and analysis. Furthermore, it discusses ethical considerations, methodological limitations and research quality criteria in qualitative research. The fourth chapter presents and analyzes the findings of the study, which suggest that the developmental discourse of EPM and social persuasion are generally observable in the organizations investigated in this study, and that the most successful form of social persuasion consists of a combination of positive and negative feedback.

In the fifth chapter, these findings are juxtaposed with previous research in an effort to extract and evaluate the study’s contribution. Thus, finding that social persuasion can mitigate the efficacy-depleting effects of EPM, it is argued that the control and discipline discourse offers a one-dimensional and inadequate perspective on EPM, and that the strategic value and potential of social persuasion is particularly high in the empirical context chosen for this study. Finally, the sixth chapter summarizes the findings, answers the research question, and offers future implications for theory and practice based on the discussion in the preceding chapter.
Literature review and theoretical approach

2.1 Self-efficacy

The genesis of self-efficacy can be traced to Bandura's (1977) seminal article on the topic; in essence, the concept can be defined as a belief in one's ability to perform a specific task (Bandura, 1977, 1982; Gist, 1987; Karl et al., 1993). Thus, as noted by Yeo and Neal (2006), the original definition of the term is distinctly task-specific, as opposed to general. However, researchers have long tended to measure the latter type (Bandura, 1997, p. 40; Yeo & Neal, 2006), and these general measures, says Bandura (2012, p. 17), "usually bear weak relation ... to domain-related self-efficacy beliefs". Even though Bandura (1977, 1997) has conceded that self-efficacy varies in generality and in spite of the fact that general self-efficacy seen as a trait that is "relatively stable across situations and over time" has received increased attention in research (see Yeo & Neal, 2006), the present study adopts the task-specific definition. Indeed, the type of self-efficacy investigated in this study is related to the specific occupational task of providing customer service in an EPM-permeated context.

It should be noted that there is a degree of conceptual confusion stemming from supposed overlaps between self-efficacy on the one hand, and self-esteem and internal locus of control on the other (Gist, 1987; Bandura, 1997, pp. 11-13, p. 20). In an effort to dispel this notion, Bandura (1997, p. 11) has argued that "self-efficacy is concerned with judgments of personal capabilities, whereas self-esteem is concerned with judgments of self-worth. There is no fixed relationship between beliefs about one's capabilities and whether one likes or dislikes oneself". Likewise, self-efficacy "cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be considered the same as beliefs about whether actions affect outcomes", the latter defining locus of control (Bandura, 1997, p. 20). In lieu of any cogent counterarguments advanced against these distinctions, and considering that similar distinctions have been made elsewhere (see Gist, 1987), the present study rests on the assumption that they are valid.

Expounding on the self-efficacy construct, referred to as the most important factor of human agency (where agency denotes intentionality [Bandura, 1997, p. 3]), self-efficacy is said to influence

- the courses of action people choose to pursue, how much effort they put forth in given endeavors, how long they will persevere in the face of
obstacles and failures, their resilience in adversity, whether their thought patterns are self-hindering or self-aiding, how much stress and depression they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands, and the level of accomplishments they realize. (Bandura, 1997, p. 3)

Moreover, self-efficacy purportedly affects well-being and whether the individual has an optimistic or pessimistic outlook (Bandura, 2006, 2012). Consequently, it is a significant determinant of an individual's cognition, motivation and behavior (Bandura, 1994). In light of the ostensibly pervasive influence of self-efficacy, and given that people naturally exercise human agency at work, it is hardly surprising that self-efficacy has been identified as an essential predictor of work performance and success (see Miraglia et al., 2017). As a corollary, cultivating employee self-efficacy becomes a managerial imperative.

In explicit terms, Miraglia et al. (2017), having observed that employees granted sufficient autonomy and empowerment to adapt working conditions according to their own preferences experienced greater self-efficacy, suggested that "organizations may benefit from interventions directly aimed at strengthening workers' self-efficacy" (p. 268). More implicitly, it stands to reason that increased self-efficacy, provided that it actually determines performance and success, which previous research confirms (Gist, 1987; Yeo & Neal, 2006; Moores & Chang, 2009), and that it does indeed increase effort, perseverance, level of accomplishment, etc. (see Bandura, 1997, p. 3; Miraglia et al., 2017), clearly has the potential to benefit organizations.

By the same token, an organizational context that inhibits the cultivation of self-efficacy might be detrimental to the employees and, by extension, the organization, for "under forcible disincentives or imposed social and physical constraints, individuals are disinclined to act on their efficacy beliefs" (Bandura, 2012, p. 10). Moreover, punitive and unresponsive environments may give rise to feelings of apathy, despondency and depression, which may in turn reduce self-efficacy and motivate the affected individuals to abandon said environments (Bandura, 1997, p. 21, 113). As will be discussed in the upcoming section, research suggests that electronic performance monitoring is liable to create such seemingly destructive environments (e.g., Irving et al., 1986; Smith et al., 1992; Ball & Margulis, 2011).
2.2 Self-efficacy and EPM

Electronic performance monitoring, herein broadly defined as "the use of electronic instruments ... to collect, store, analyze, and report individual or group actions or performance" (Nebeker & Tatum, 1993, p. 509), started appearing in the academic literature in the 1980s; as early as 1982, a focus on increased managerial control, negative effects on employees and invidious parallels to Taylorism may be observed (see Gregory & Nussbaum, 1982). In view of the fact that this negative focus has continually been applied in empirical studies of EPM ever since (e.g., Irving et al., 1986; Smith et al., 1992; Carayon, 1994; see also Perkins, 2013), one might argue that an assumption of negativity permeates EPM research.

In support of this claim, Holman et al. (2002, p. 75) made reference to "the argument that monitoring is an intrinsically threatening and anxiety-provoking event", and Perkins (2013, p. 4) noted that most studies of EPM in call centers "appear to have focused on the unfavorable impacts upon monitored employees". As a logical consequence of this assumption of negativity, the negative effects of EPM on employees in the extant literature are manifold. For the intents and purposes of this study, namely to investigate social persuasion – a key source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) – in the context of EPM, only the negative effects that can be connected to self-efficacy will be taken into consideration in the following discussion.

As mentioned in the preceding section, self-efficacy influences a variety of factors, including stress, anxiety and depression levels (and related coping abilities), well-being, motivation and cognition, and optimism/pessimism (Bandura, 1997, 2006, 2012). Consequently, certain negative effects of EPM observed in previous studies can be connected to the self-efficacy construct. For instance, one of the most commonly observed negative effects of EPM is stress (e.g., Irving et al., 1986; Carayon, 1994; Sarpong & Rees, 2014). Low self-efficacy has been shown to increase subjective stress and emotional arousal, and vice versa (Bandura, 1997, p. 267); thus, high perceived stress levels are arguably indicative of low self-efficacy, given that high self-efficacy is associated with better coping skills. Likewise, the negative effects of reduced job satisfaction and well-being (e.g., Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989; Holman et al., 2002; Rose & Wright, 2005), negative emotional states such as depression and anxiety, and generally pessimistic attitudes toward monitoring (e.g., Smith et al., 2002; Wells et al., 2007) can all be connected to self-efficacy.
Furthermore, while autonomy in job design was recently mentioned as being connected to higher levels of self-efficacy (see Miraglia et al., 2017), employees in EPM-permeated contexts tend to perceive themselves as having little personal control (Carayon, 1994). As observed by Smith et al. (1992, p. 18), "EPM systems that overemphasize work quantity at the expense of work quality may not allow workers to exercise control over work pace ... [which is] externally defined". These parallels indicate that EPM creates the type of punitive and constrained environment that reduces self-efficacy and increases employee turnover (see Bandura, 1997, 2012; for confirmation of the latter, see Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989).

If high self-efficacy enables people to better cope with all these deleterious effects, as previous research indicates, then the high incidence of said effects and a correspondingly high turnover rate (indicative of low perseverance and resilience) arguably imply low levels of employee self-efficacy resulting from the influence of EPM. Therefore, it would seem as if EPM is inimical to self-efficacy, as was recently suggested by Jeske and Santuzzi (2015), who, in addition to confirming previous findings relating EPM to negative attitudes with respect to job satisfaction, commitment and perceived control, found that it also had a negative impact on employee self-efficacy – particularly when monitoring was continuous. Similarly, Homan et al.'s (2002, p. 75) study "demonstrated that it is the perceived intensity of monitoring that accounts for its negative effects".

While this discussion would appear to validate the assumption of negativity that pervades EPM research, perhaps justifying the use of the Taylorism (Gregory & Nussbaum, 1982), big brother (Sarpong & Rees, 2014), satanic mills (Kinnie et al., 2000), and panopticon (Fernie & Metcalf, 1998, p. 2) labels to describe EPM, the dystopian and control-oriented dimension of EPM emphasized by critics represents only one of its facets. As intimated in the "reporting" component of Nebeker and Tatum's (1993, p. 509) definition of EPM, which is adopted in the present study, the provision of feedback based on performance data collected, stored and analyzed with the aid of EPM is an integral part of the concept (for example, see Stanton, 2000; Ball & Margulis, 2011; Sarpong & Rees, 2014). This brings the literature review to the topic of social persuasion – performance feedback that increases self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).
2.3 Social persuasion

Elaborating on the concept of self-efficacy, Bandura (1977, 1994, 1997) propounded four sources capable of influencing it, namely *enactive mastery experience* (personally performing a task); *vicarious experience* (observing someone performing a task), *verbal persuasion* (external encouragement), and *physiological and affective states* (internal cues). Two aspects are particularly relevant to the present study.

First, verbal persuasion is also called social persuasion (e.g., Bandura, 1997, p. 101); given that the provision of feedback need not necessarily be verbal (for example, it might consist of an e-mail), this study uses the term social persuasion to clarify that no communication medium is excluded. Second, social persuasion is allegedly inferior to other sources, especially in relation to enactive mastery and vicarious experience (Bandura, 1997, p. 80, 86, 101); thus, it "serves as a useful adjunct to more powerful efficacy-promoting influences" (ibid., p. 106).

Curiously, every source of self-efficacy is empirically tested in the original 1977 article – with the exception of social persuasion (Bandura, 1977, p. 212); later empirical studies, however, do support the supremacy of other sources (see Bandura, 1997, p. 80, 88). This is in consonance with feedback theory stipulating that task-generated feedback – a trial and error approach reminiscent of enactive mastery experience – is superior to that generated through external sources (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Stanton, 2000).

As has already been implied, social persuasion can be viewed as a particular species of feedback, the latter herein defined as "actions taken by an external agent to provide information regarding some aspect(s) of one's task performance" (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996, p. 255), considering that its purpose is to make people believe "that they possess the capabilities to master given tasks" (Bandura, 1997, p. 101) and to increase their "confidence in rising to address workplace challenges" (Dimotakis, Maurer & Mitchell, 2017, p. 1516) – in other words, to increase their self-efficacy. Appropriately, this definition of social persuasion resonates with the task-specific definition of self-efficacy to which this study adheres. The following statement illustrates the underlying logic of social persuasion:

People who are persuaded ... that they possess the capabilities to master given tasks are likely to mobilize greater effort and sustain it than if they
harbor self-doubts and dwell on personal deficiencies when difficulties arise. To the extent that persuasive boosts in perceived self-efficacy lead people to try hard enough to succeed, self-affirming beliefs promote development of skills and a sense of personal efficacy. (Bandura, 1997, p. 101)

However, it should be mentioned that social persuasion is not limited to the provision of feedback; although this indubitably constitutes the core of the concept, social persuasion involves more than positive appraisals or inspirational homilies. In addition to cultivating people's beliefs in their capabilities, [skilled efficacy builders] structure activities for them in ways that bring success and avoid placing them prematurely in situations where they are likely to experience repeated failure. (Bandura, 1997, p. 106)

Regarding the feedback process, Bandura (1984, cited in Gist, 1987, p. 477; see also Bandura, 1997, p. 105) has claimed that the chief determinants of the potential of social persuasion are "credibility and expertness of the [feedback] source, consensus among multiple sources, and familiarity of the source with task demands"; along with objective performance criteria, these factors all supposedly influence the recipient's trust and confidence in the source (see Snyder, Williams & Cashman, 1984; Bandura, 1997, p. 105), echoing general feedback theory (e.g., Ilgen, Fisher & Taylor, 1979; Ilgen, Peterson, Martin & Boeschen, 1981). Another crucial factor is appraisal disparity, that is, the discrepancy between one's personal judgment and the feedback provided. Based on the assumption that people believe that they know themselves better than external agents do, appraisal discrepancy can thus be a source of resistance to social persuasion, eliciting defensive behaviors aimed at protecting self-image (Bandura, 1997, pp. 104-105; see also Ilgen et al., 1979; Forsythe & Johnson, 2017).

Yet another significant determinant is framing (Bandura, 1997, p. 102); empirical studies of the effects of feedback on self-efficacy have found that constructive (i.e., specific and considerate) feedback results in higher self-efficacy than does destructive feedback (Baron, 1988). In a similar vein, Karl et al. (1993, p. 379) were able to conclude that "the more positive the performance feedback received, the greater the increase in personal self-efficacy".
What these studies suggest is that regardless of the relative potential of social persuasion, compared to other sources of self-efficacy, it has definitely been shown to possess the power to increase self-efficacy; for the purposes of the present study, the key question is whether social persuasion retains this ability in an ostensibly efficacy-depleting organizational environment. At this point of the discussion, however, an intriguing finding by Karl et al. (1993) needs to be accentuated. The authors observed that "the self-efficacy of low self-efficacy individuals was more susceptible to influence from external cues than that of high self-efficacy individuals" (Karl et al., 1993, p. 390). Ironically, this would seem to suggest a beneficial effect of reducing employee self-efficacy – after all, it could actually make employees more susceptible to social persuasion. The efficacy-depleting effect of EPM (see Jeske & Santuzzi, 2015) may thus have positive implications for social persuasion, leading the discussion to the core of the study.

2.4 Social persuasion and EPM

Contrasting the control and discipline discourse dominating EPM research and fostering the aforementioned assumption of negativity (see Holman et al., 2002; Perkins, 2013), researchers have recognized an alternative and more benevolent perspective. By way of example, Chalykoff and Kochan (1989, p. 812) distinguished between monitoring "used as a 'gotcha'" and employee development – the former reflects the control and discipline discourse reviewed earlier, while the latter focuses on the feedback function of EPM and, consequently, a potentially more constructive discourse. Similarly, Wells et al. (2007) argued for the advantages of framing the purpose of EPM as a developmental tool, rather than "as a deterrent to negative behaviors" (p. 135); of special interest is the entailing managerial implication that management "should use information gathered from the system to identify positive behavior and should publicly recognize good performance, deemphasizing identification and correction of inappropriate behavior" (Wells et al., 2007, p. 134).

Juxtaposed with the prerequisites for successful social persuasion derived in the preceding section, Wells et al.'s (2007) suggestion is that management should thus utilize EPM as an instrument of social persuasion, and avoid the "gotcha" or punitive approach. In the discussion pertaining to self-efficacy and EPM, however, the presence of a myriad of negative effects was established, indicating that the control approach prevails. In support of this, Ball and Margulis (2011, p. 119) have claimed
that call center monitoring "is predominantly introduced to find and detect fault"; furthermore, "studies of supervisors' use of power indicate a tendency for monitoring to focus supervisors on problems and threats, hence a coercive supervisory style, rather than on successes and empowerment" (Smith et al., 1981, cited in Ball & Margulis, 2011, p. 119).

Even Bain and Taylor (2000), in their sharp criticism against the characterization of EPM as a "panopticon" (see Fernie & Metcalf, 1998), conceded that monitoring is indeed "oppressive and punitive" (Bain & Taylor, 2000, p. 12). While these observations have dire implications for the prospect of increasing employee self-efficacy by means of social persuasion, especially in light of the relative inferiority of social persuasion as a source of self-efficacy (see Bandura, 1997), extant research does support the ameliorating effects of EPM-based feedback on several variables.

Chalykoff and Kochan (1989) found that attention to good performance feedback – key components of which being feedback sign, clear performance criteria, supervisory expertise and delivery approach – mitigated the negative effects of low job satisfaction and high turnover. By way of corroboration, Holman et al. (2002) were able to conclude that positive feedback led to increases in well-being and job satisfaction, and reductions in emotional exhaustion and depression. More generally, communicating the developmental purposes of EPM (i.e., emphasizing the feedback mechanism) has been shown to generate positive employee attitudes toward the system (Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989) and to increase employees' organizational commitment, their inclination to reciprocate, and the perceived fairness of monitoring (Wells et al., 2007).

Given that self-efficacy influences stress coping, well-being, depression, optimism and pessimism, perseverance and resilience (Bandura, 1997, 2006, 2012), the results of these studies suggest that EPM-based feedback has the potential to increase self-efficacy. Rejecting this line of reasoning, however, Jeske and Santuzzi (2015) found that feedback had no significant influence on perceived self-efficacy. Not only does this finding contradict the recently mentioned findings that attest to the positive influence of feedback in the context of EPM (e.g., Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989; Holman et al., 2002); also, they lead one to question the validity of Karl et al.'s (1993) observation that low self-efficacy positively impacts feedback susceptibility.
It should be noted that Jeske and Santuzzi's (2015) study measured general self-efficacy using surveys based on Schwarzer and Jerusalem's (2000) "parsimonious" and quantitatively oriented scale (see Jeske & Santuzzi, 2015, p. 66), one that arguably represents the global measures of self-efficacy criticized by Bandura (1997, 2012). Consequently, an in-depth understanding of social persuasion in context and connected to a specific task is rendered unattainable. This methodological criticism illuminates a more general predilection to use global, non-specific measures in EPM research (see Holman et al., 2002), and a related propensity for quantitative methods of analysis:

[Monitoring] researchers have used an extensive battery of survey measures, mainly in field research, but also in assessing outcomes of laboratory experimentation. These measures have facilitated the examination of statistical relations between constructs but may have hidden some interesting and worthwhile insights into the psychological reality of monitored workers. (Stanton, 2000, p. 108)

Against this backdrop, additional insights into the potential of social persuasion in an empirical context pervaded by EPM could be gained with the aid of a qualitative research design conducive to more detailed and exact scrutiny (for example, see Flick, 2009; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

2.5 Theoretical approach

To reiterate, the research question guiding this study is:

How do customer service agents perceive and experience social persuasion when subjected to electronic performance monitoring?

In accordance with the qualitative research design adopted herein, key concepts that relate to the research question have been extracted from the literature review to inform the theoretical approach or conceptual framework (Farquhar, 2012, p. 36). One can divine from the review that social persuasion is predicated on a multitude of factors that can be divided into influencers and effects, the former essentially shaping the feedback process and the susceptibility of the recipient, the latter illustrating the potential effects of social persuasion on the recipient's self-efficacy (see Figure 1).
Categories 1-4 in Figure 1 represent the influencers, as demonstrated by the connecting lines and the horizontal arrows in categories 3-4 pointing toward the center of the figure. By way of example, performance criteria (category 1), source credibility (category 2), feedback sign (category 3), and perceived trust in the source (category 4) all influence the effects of social persuasion (e.g., Bandura, 1984, cited in Gist, 1987, p. 477; Bandura, 1997, p. 102), as shown by the vertical arrow emanating from the center of Figure 1 and pointing toward category 5. Applied to one of the exemplified sub-categories, feedback sign (category 3) influences the extent to which the recipient experiences increased confidence in his or her personal capabilities.
(category 5), as observed by Karl et al. (1993). For an overview of each component’s connections to previous research and the key concepts of the study, see Table 1.

Table 1. Influencers and effects of social persuasion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Job design/autonomy</td>
<td>Employees who can exercise control over their work experience greater self-efficacy (Miraglia et al., 2017).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Performance criteria</td>
<td>Objective criteria are more conducive to successful social persuasion than subjective criteria stipulated by the individual feedback source (e.g., Bandura, 1997).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rewarding or punitive environment</td>
<td>Punitive and constrained work conditions inhibit the exercise of self-efficacy beliefs and increase employee turnover (Bandura, 1997, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Purpose of EPM</td>
<td>Emphasizing the feedback mechanism and developmental purpose of EPM may mitigate negative effects of monitoring and make employees more positively inclined toward EPM (Chalykoff &amp; Kochan, 1989; Wells et al., 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Intensity of EPM</td>
<td>Self-efficacy levels are particularly low – and attitudes especially negative – when monitoring is continuous (Holman et al., 2002; Jeske &amp; Santuzzi, 2015).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Credibility and expertness</td>
<td>Supervisor credibility and expertness are chief determinants of the impact of social persuasion by virtue of their effects on the recipient’s susceptibility to feedback (Gist, 1987; Bandura, 1997).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Delivery approach/supervisory style</td>
<td>In addition to being connected to the sub-category of framing (see below), the approach and supervisory style adopted by the feedback source is crucial, for &quot;[skilled efficacy builders] structure activities for [the recipients] in ways that bring success and avoid placing them prematurely in situations where they are likely to experience repeated failure&quot; (Bandura, 1997, p. 106).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Consensus among sources</td>
<td>While only briefly mentioned in the literature (see Gist, 1987), one might connect this sub-category to performance criteria and suspect that appraisal disparity between different feedback sources causes confusion and reduces both the recipient’s trust and confidence in the source as well as the recipient’s susceptibility to social persuasion (see Snyder et al., 1984; Bandura, 1997).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Framing</td>
<td>Positive and constructive feedback increases self-efficacy and vice versa (Baron, 1988; Karl et al., 1993).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Trust/confidence in source</td>
<td>Successful social persuasion is contingent upon the recipient’s trust and confidence in the feedback source (e.g., Bandura, 1997).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Appraisal discrepancy and self-image</td>
<td>Discrepancies between the recipient's own perceptions and the feedback delivered may elicit self-protective reactions aimed at protecting self-image, ultimately affecting the susceptibility of the recipient (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Forsythe &amp; Johnson, 2017).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Self-efficacy level</td>
<td>Individuals with low self-efficacy might be more susceptible to social persuasion (see Karl et al., 1993; cf. Jeske &amp; Santuzzi, 2015).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Attitude toward/satisfaction with EPM</td>
<td>Negative attitudes toward EPM – expressed in, inter alia, low job satisfaction, organizational commitment and perceived control – may be detrimental to self-efficacy (see category 5); utilizing EPM for developmental purposes and providing constructive feedback may mitigate these effects (Chalykoff &amp; Kochan, 1989; Wells et al., 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Beliefs/confidence in personal capabilities</td>
<td>Beliefs and confidence in one's personal capabilities constitutes the definition of self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1977); in turn, self-efficacy influences the areas represented by the remaining sub-categories (see Bandura, 1997), allowing one to gauge the effects of social persuasion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Thought patterns and courses of action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Effort and motivation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Perseverance/resilience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Emotional state</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Optimism/pessimism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2.6 Summary

The literature review illustrates the complex organizational environment created at the intersection of social persuasion and EPM. On the one hand, the assumption of negativity and the control/discipline discourse can be invoked to characterize EPM, with the entailing depletion of self-efficacy and dire implications for social persuasion. On the other hand, there exists the alternative discourse of employee development – predicated on a more positive assumption – that contrasts this dystopian description by providing evidence of the mitigating effects of feedback and, by extension, the potential of social persuasion. In other words, the review reveals an interesting contradiction: While EPM is ostensibly inimical to self-efficacy, one of its central features is nonetheless feedback – a key source of self-efficacy.
One might further discern from the review that this phenomenon has only been studied indirectly or superficially, a fact that has generated conflicting findings and hindered an in-depth understanding from being generated. With the aid of qualitative methods and a comprehensive conceptual framework taking into account both influencers as well as effects of social persuasion, this study represents an effort to gain additional insights into this intricate organizational reality, as witnessed by those experiencing it.

3 Methodology

3.1 Empirical setting

3.1.1 Selection
Following Yin (2009, cited in Farquhar, 2012, p. 39), the literature review "suggested not only the conceptual framework ... but also the conditions under which [the] particular phenomenon is likely to be found". Indeed, many empirical studies of EPM have been conducted in call centers (Perkins, 2013), for they "have been identified as the archetypal surveillance-based organization" (Sewell et al., 2011, p. 190), making this environment "an excellent location in which to study performance monitoring" (Holman et al., 2002, p. 59). Therefore, the call center can be said to constitute a critical case in EPM research "in which the relations to be studied become especially clear" (Flick, 2009, p. 122).

Considering that the selection procedure in qualitative research is purposive and thus undertaken with the aim of "illuminating and extending the relationships of the constructs [as depicted in the conceptual framework]" (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27, cited in Farquhar, 2012, p. 40), the call center environment was deemed suitable for this study. Furthermore, in recognition of the fact that negotiating access to an organization is as important as it is time-consuming and challenging (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 336; Farquhar, 2012, p. 49), selection was also based on the convenience criterion (for example, see Flick, 2009, p. 122); the present author thus contacted an acquaintance working in a call center that utilizes EPM. This individual subsequently contacted additional customer service agents employed by the same organization, illustrating how snowball sampling was also used (see Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 126; Farquhar, 2012, p. 75); this organization originally constituted the empirical setting of the study.
However, all but one informant eventually decided not to participate, either through procrastination or by referencing their fear of not remaining anonymous – despite assurances to the contrary; in other words, the author seemingly failed to establish credibility (see Saunders et al., 2009, p. 182) and had to alter the research design. Time being of the essence, the case study research design was abandoned in favor of a research design incorporating 10 informants from as many different organizations (see section 3.2), chiefly because of its increasing the likelihood of gaining swift access to informants – the pool of candidates no longer being limited to one particular company – but also by virtue of its allowing the one willing informant from the original case to participate.

Applying the purposive selection criteria described above, informants were thus located through additional acquaintances and their subsequent referrals. The author presented the overall aim of the study to these prospective informants, asked whether they were inclined to participate, and emphasized the aspects of confidentiality and anonymity in an effort to maximize credibility. In assessing their potential to "provide an important perspective that [would] elucidate and clarify aspects of the investigation" (Polkinghorne, 2005, cited in Farquhar, 2012, p. 74), the following aspects were taken into consideration:

[Informants] should have the necessary knowledge and experience of the issue or object at their disposal for answering the questions in the interview [and] should also have the capability to reflect and articulate, should have the time to be asked ... and should be ready to participate in the study.

(Morse, 1998, p. 73, cited in Flick, 2009, p. 123)

Finally, the author sought to ascertain a level of homogeneity between organizations and informants in order to make them comparable and thereby facilitate data analysis (see Farquhar, 2012, p. 71).

3.1.2 Presentation of organizations and informants

While the organizations ultimately selected for this study operate in a variety of industries and also differ in terms of their offers (some being service providers, others being purveyors of products) and in regard to size and geographical scope, they all have customer service departments in which employees are subjected to similar forms of EPM. These are both quantitative (measuring call times, number of
calls taken, how long customers have to wait in line, etc.) as well as qualitative (evaluating service quality based on factors such as tone of voice and overall approach); a final commonality of crucial importance to this study is, naturally, the provision of EPM-based feedback to employees. The informants also have different characteristics, as detailed in Table 2, although age and tenure have actually been shown not to influence susceptibility to feedback (Snyder et al., 1984). What qualified them for participation was the fact that they are all customer service agents working for organizations that have implemented EPM in their call centers.

Table 2. Presentation of organizations and informants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Tenure</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7 months</td>
<td>Parking</td>
<td>March 12, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malin</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Banking</td>
<td>March 28, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2, 5 years</td>
<td>Appliances &amp; Electronics</td>
<td>March 28, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Wide Variety Retailing</td>
<td>March 29, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Books</td>
<td>March 30, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leo</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11 months</td>
<td>B2B Payments</td>
<td>April 3, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>April 19, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johanna</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Electric Utilities</td>
<td>April 19, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elvira</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1, 5 years</td>
<td>Furniture</td>
<td>April 20, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>Tech</td>
<td>April 20, 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at uncovering "interesting and worthwhile insights into the psychological reality of monitored employees" (Stanton, 2000, p. 108) by comparing and contrasting the multiple perspectives of the informants, allowing one to "pin down the specific conditions under which a finding will occur" and see how these conditions are related (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014, p. 101). Arguably, such an approach resonates well with the aim to investigate and arrive at a deeper understanding of social persuasion in the context of EPM, and thus gain insights into the complex relationship between performance feedback and self-efficacy.

In addition to being reflected in the purposive selection procedures discussed above (see Flick, 2009, p. 134), this qualitative approach also mirrors the key terms of "perceive" and "express" in the research question guiding this study, in view of the
fact that subjective viewpoints are at the core of qualitative research (see Flick, 2009, p. 14, 16). This has implications for the methods of data generation and analysis selected for the present study; before additional methods are presented and justified, however, two other aspects having profound methodological implications are discussed, namely the author's ontological and epistemological stances (see Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 492; Farquhar, 2012, p. 15).

3.3 Philosophy of social science

Bandura (1997, p. 6) has argued that "social structures – which are devised to organize, guide, and regulate human affairs in given domains by authorized rules and sanctions – do not arise by immaculate conception; they are created by human activity", and that even though such systems "impose constraints and provide resources for personal development ... [they do not] foreordain what individuals become and do in given situations" (ibid.). This description of a social structure can be applied to EPM, which indeed constitutes a system comprised of rules and sanctions aimed at organizing, guiding and regulating employees; furthermore, both the subjective viewpoints of employees as well as managerial action influence how employees perceive this system and determine what they become and do (e.g., Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989; Carayon, 1994). Stanton's (2000, p. 88, 90) argument that "employees may be more or less inclined to accept ... feedback based on their beliefs about the process that produced it" (see categories 1-4 in Figure 1) is particularly illustrative in this regard.

Hence, it stands to reason that the phenomenon under study – social persuasion in the context of EPM – is not embedded in an objective reality "distinct from individuals' perceptions"; rather, it is "socially constructed and understood only by examining the perceptions of participants" (Farquhar, 2012, p. 17). The ontological and epistemological assumptions permeating this study are therefore ideographic and interpretivist, respectively (see Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 29, 34; Farquhar, 2012, p. 17).

Having determined that subjective viewpoints are at the core of these assumptions, it becomes clear how they underpin the methods hitherto described. As was recently mentioned, subjective viewpoints are essential to qualitative research (see Flick, 2009, p. 14, 16), and the purposive sampling was undertaken with the aim of
generating certain viewpoints (Polkinghorne, 2005, cited in Farquhar, 2012, p. 74); finally, an equally explicit focus on generating subjective viewpoints is found in the research question. In the following two sections detailing methods of data generation and analysis, the interpretivist epistemological stance is especially evident.

3.4 Data generation

3.4.1 Interview method

Based on the assumption that an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon currently under study is contingent upon gaining insights into the subjective perceptions of the informants (see Farquhar, 2012, p. 19), the method most conducive to eliciting these qualitatively oriented perceptions was incorporated into the research design. Thus, the semi-structured interview commonly utilized in collecting qualitative data (ibid., p. 73) became the method of data generation; importantly, this method is "linked to the expectation that the interviewed subjects' viewpoints are more likely to be expressed in an openly designed interview situation than in a standardized interview or a questionnaire" (Flick, 2009, p. 150).

3.4.2 Interview guide

Combining the simultaneous flexibility and structure offered by the semi-structured interview, an interview guide with theoretically grounded questions based on the categories included in Figure 1 (the conceptual framework) was created, leaving room for probing and ad-hoc questions in the process (e.g., Flick, 2009, p. 151, 158; Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 363, 369). Specifically, the following criteria were taken into consideration when designing the interview guide and conducting the interviews: Non-direction, specificity, depth, and range (Merton & Kendall, 1946, cited in Flick, 2009, p. 150). The non-direction criterion stipulates that the interviewer "should ask unstructured questions first and introduce increased structuring only later during the interviews to prevent the interviewer's frame of reference being imposed on the interviewee's viewpoints (Flick, 2009, p. 151), which is reflected in the more general questions in the interview guide (for example, see Appendix, questions 9-10), and the more specific ones following them (questions 11-20).

The specificity criterion entails preventing general statements from permeating the entire interview situation and encouraging "retrospective inspection", i.e., "[supporting] the interviewees in recalling a specific situation" (ibid.), the latter being
especially evident in questions 15 and 19. The related depth criterion aims to guarantee that "the emotional responses in the interview go beyond simple assessments like 'pleasant' or 'unpleasant'" (Flick, 2009, pp. 151-152), which is of particular significance given that emotional states are explicitly connected to the key concepts of the study (see Figure 1). This criterion can be observed in the emotional focus reflected in questions 9-10, 15 and 19, and (more generally) in the probing and follow-up questions throughout the interview guide.

Finally, range "aims at securing that all aspects and topics relevant to the research question are mentioned during the interview", and affording the interviewee ample opportunity to raise themes and topics of interest and relevance to him or her (Flick, 2009, p. 151; see also Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 363). Applying it to the present study, the questions in the interview guide thus cover all categories and sub-categories included in Figure 1 (category 1 is mostly reflected in questions 1-8, categories 2-5 in questions 9-20, and the final question, number 21, is of an all-encompassing nature), which in turn constitutes the research question in operationalized form (where operationalization is understood as the process whereby key theoretical concepts are made observable or measurable in order to enable data collection [Farquhar, 2012, pp. 18-19]).

Having accounted for the creation of the interview guide, however, the aforementioned probing and ad-hoc questions resulting from, for example, the author’s perceived need to "lead back to topics that have already been mentioned but not detailed deeply enough" (Flick, 2009, p. 151) should be emphasized, as they highlight the fact that semi-structured interviews are improvisational to a certain extent (see Flick, 2009, p. 154; Farquhar, 2012, p. 73). Consequently, the interview guide is not entirely representative of all questions asked during the interviews.

3.4.3 Description of interviews

By way of contextual documentation (see Flick, 2009, pp. 298-299), in addition to Table 2, four interviews were conducted face-to-face, one of which at a café and the others in the respective informant’s home; the remaining six interviews were held over the phone. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and the author was allowed to make audio recordings in all but one case. One informant made her participation contingent upon the absence of a recording device; consequently, the author had to resort to taking notes (at least on the computer and not on paper). The
interviews generally adhered closely to the interview guide, although the questions were not always asked chronologically. The informants had a tendency to anticipate several questions and raise topics of their own volition, while the author remained flexible and interjected probing and follow-up questions intermittently (see Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 370). Furthermore, five informants were contacted on a second occasion and asked to elaborate on certain answers. All interviews were held in Swedish.

Finally, the author tried to make the informants as comfortable and candid as possible by (1) encouraging them to treat the interview situation as an informal conversation, (2) telling them that no matter what they said, the information would be highly valuable to the study, and (3) stressing that the study does not seek to prove a certain point, so as not to give them "any cause to consciously or unconsciously construct a specific (i.e., biased) version of their experiences" (Flick, 2009, p. 388).

3.5 Data analysis

3.5.1 Analytical approach

Before describing the actual method employed to analyze the data, the overall approach governing this area is discussed. Considering that this study develops a conceptual framework grounded in extant theories and then applies it to a specific context, it has a deductive dimension (for example, see Farquhar, 2012, pp. 24-25). However, it does not seek to refute or confirm a particular hypothesis; rather, the ambition is to complement and extend existing theoretical knowledge based on the analysis of a number of organizations, which alludes to "exploration" and "understanding", and therefore suggests that the study also has an inductive dimension (ibid.). In other words, this study exemplifies how the two approaches are not necessarily incompatible (see Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 25; Farquhar, 2012, pp. 25-26) and, consequently, follows an abductive approach "that moves back and forth between induction and deduction, thereby recognizing the limitations of a purely inductive or deductive approach to reasoning" (Farquhar, 2012, p. 26).

3.5.2 Transcription and analysis

Having made audio recordings of all but one interview, the author engaged in transcription (and simultaneous translation from Swedish to English) to prepare the data for analysis. For research questions of a "more psychological nature", says Flick
(2009, pp. 299-300), "where linguistic exchange is a medium for studying certain contents, exaggerated standards of exactness in transcriptions are justified only in exceptional cases". This being an appropriate characterization of the present study, transcription was not verbatim (see Strauss, 1987, cited in Flick, 2009, p. 300); specifically, statements that did not pertain to the certain contents under study – as defined by the conceptual framework (see Figure 1) – were not transcribed.

The selective transcription thus employed facilitated the coding process, herein understood as "the allocation of material to existing categories" (Flick, 2009, p. 435; see also Farquhar, 2012, p. 92), as the transcripts only included data that could be allocated to the a priori codes of Figure 1. Another understanding of the coding process adopted herein is that – following Miles et al. (2014, p. 72) – "coding is analysis" (emphasis in original), the former being "the 'critical link' between data collection [and] explanation of meaning" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 72), which is reflected in the analytical method chosen for this study, namely theoretical thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). According to this approach, codes are grounded in previous research and applied to the data in an effort to identify common themes or "repeated patterns of meaning" (ibid., p. 86) that may inform extant theory (ibid., p. 84). Thus, at the first level of coding, the data was divided into the five main categories of Figure 1. At the second level, the data was further allocated to the sub-categories within each main category (Farquhar, 2012, p. 93), after which an examination of similarities and differences between organizations and informants (see Miles et al., 2014, p. 101) was conducted.

3.6 Research ethics

Recognizing that ethical considerations are an integral part of the research process (for example, see Farquhar, 2012, p. 55), this study has first and foremost taken the three aspects of "scientific quality, the welfare of participants, and respect for the dignity and rights of participants" (Allmark, 2002, p. 9, cited in Flick, 2009, p. 39) into consideration. Regarding scientific quality, this study does not duplicate existing research; rather, it makes theoretical and practical contributions that complement existing knowledge (see Flick, 2009, p. 40). In terms of the other two aspects, voluntary informed consent was obtained from all participating informants. Hence, the author informed them of the aim of the study, clarified their role as sources of primary data and how the data would be used, offered them confidentiality and
anonymity (given that the interview guide contains questions requiring informants to divulge personal feelings and thoughts, and to pass judgment on organizations and managers alike), and emphasized their right to withdraw at any time (see Farquhar, 2012, p. 57).

Finally, in the interest of ascertaining that justice was done to the informants and that the findings, analysis and conclusion were truly grounded in the data they provided, two instances of communicative validation (Flick, 2009, pp. 388-389) may be mentioned. First, each informant was made aware of the opportunity to read and comment on the transcript and subsequent analysis at the end of the interview; second, the five follow-up interviews were specifically aimed at clarifying and confirming the informants' previous answers.

3.7 Methodological limitations

First, in recognition of the commonly raised issue of external validity or generalizability in qualitative research (for example, see Flick, 2009, p. 31; Farquhar, 2012, p. 103), it should be emphasized that the present study does not aim for "statistical" or "numerical" generalization; rather, this study aspires to generalize "analytically" or "theoretically" (Flick, 2009, p. 130; Farquhar, 2012, pp. 104-105). As a result, "generalization takes place from data to theory rather than to population" (Farquhar, 2012, p. 104). Indeed, the overarching purpose of the study is to inform extant research pertaining to self-efficacy, social persuasion and EPM, based on the empirical data.

Second, it is acknowledged that interviewing only one informant from each organization might be detrimental to within-case depth (ibid., p. 43); nevertheless, the qualitative methods employed in the present study arguably achieve greater depth than the quantitative methods and general measures of key concepts dominating previous research (see Stanton, 2000; Holman et al., 2002).

Third, the time constraints encountered after the participants from the original case withdrew from their preliminary commitment necessitated the use of phone interviews in six instances, which has a number of implications:

The normal visual cues that allow your participant to control the flow of data ... [are] absent [and] you lose the opportunity to witness the non-
verbal behavior of your participant, which may adversely affect your interpretation of how far to pursue a particular line of questioning. Your participant may be less willing to provide you with as much time ... [compared with] a face-to-face interview [and you] may also encounter difficulties in developing more complex questions.
(Saunders et al., 2009, p. 349)

Moreover, the observation that "conducting an interview by telephone and taking notes is an extremely difficult process" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 349; see also Farquhar, 2012, p. 74) was made manifest in the interview with the informant who refused to be recorded. The author thereby acknowledges the possibility that the phone interviews did not quite reach the level of quality that the face-to-face interviews did.

Despite these limitations, the author has endeavored to ascertain research quality by addressing the four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, cited in Farquhar, 2012, p. 105). Thus, the study adheres to established research protocols, addresses the external validity aspect, makes a detailed and transparent account of the research process, and recognizes its shortcomings (Farquhar, 2012, pp. 105-108).

4 Findings and analysis

4.1 Organizational and EPM-related factors

By and large, informants perceive themselves to be embedded in highly controlled environments; monitoring is often described as intense and chiefly disciplinary in nature. At Parking, the managers

watch the customer service agents like hawks ... we have this big digital screen that the managers constantly monitor, and they can see who is taking calls, who is offline, and so on. If they see that everyone is doing admin work, they send us e-mails saying "Log in!" Calls are only supposed to take three minutes and you should go from one call to the next. They want the flow of calls to remain constant. (Natalie)
At B2B Payments, a similar environment is described:

I feel controlled at work because we have an open office plan, or landscape, and the managers position themselves so as to keep everyone under observation. They constantly monitor the stats, and if you are not connected, they start whining and write "Get online!" in this internal chat program we have, which you cannot turn off. (Leo)

This is further corroborated by David at Appliances & Electronics, who, especially after the call center was relocated to a position in plain view of the customers, perceives that there is "this 'big brother' who watches you"; interestingly, this is one of the labels used in previous research to characterize EPM (see Sarpong & Rees, 2014). Indeed, the feeling of being constantly kept under observation – experienced by all informants – also accentuates the "panopticon" concept similarly ascribed to call centers having implemented EPM (see Fernie & Metcalf, 1998).

In addition to the quantitatively oriented performance criteria accentuated above, there are qualitative criteria enforced by means of co-listening sessions. According to Natalie, employees are "supposed to sound like robots"; in a similar vein, Johanna perceives that management has basically "developed a single template for everyone". Virtually every informant agrees with these views by stating that there is little room for improvisation; thus, employees are seemingly not granted much autonomy to influence working conditions according to their own preferences (cf. Miraglia et al., 2017).

Moreover, these performance criteria do not correspond to the customer service agents' conceptions of high-quality customer service, which include showing empathy, listening to the customers' (sometimes very personal) stories and issues, along with being pleasant, warm and friendly in general. Consequently, instead of being rewarded for doing their utmost to – as David puts it – "satisfy the customer to the extent that you would want to", employees are verbally ordered to "interrupt the customer or hurry things along", to "do it better and more quickly", say John and Alex, respectively. They therefore seem to be "under forcible disincentives or imposed social and physical constraints", making them "disinclined to act on their efficacy beliefs" (Bandura, 2012, p. 10); after all, they believe themselves to be capable of delivering customer service superior to that which is actually delivered, but are
constrained by the policy and performance criteria enforced by management. This is in consonance with the time-honored managerial overemphasis on quantity at the perceived expense of service quality (e.g., Irving et al., 1986; Smith et al., 1992), and, perhaps, the concepts of "Taylorism" and "satanic mills" (Gregory & Nussbaum, 1982; Kinnie et al., 2000).

Juxtaposed with the aforementioned commands to "log in" and "get online", these verbal directions would also appear to suggest that the primary purpose of monitoring is "to find and detect fault" (Ball & Margulis, 2011, p. 119), and that EPM creates an environment that informants tend to perceive as punitive and unresponsive (see Bandura, 1997, p. 21, 113). In further support of the latter, most of the organizations have no formal reward systems, and where good behavior is in fact rewarded, the rewards (mainly movie tickets) are basically met with indifference or considered inadequate.

Recurring themes within the boundaries of organizational characteristics and EPM systems are thus low levels of autonomy, high perceived intensity of monitoring, controlling and disciplinary purposes of monitoring (where an official purpose of EPM has been declared by management, the common denominator is efficiency), and performance criteria that run counter to employee conceptions of service quality. Combined with the relative absence or inadequacy of reward systems, these factors appear to create the type of constrained, punitive and unresponsive work environment detrimental to self-efficacy described in previous research (e.g., Bandura, 1997, 2012; Irving et al., 1986; Smith et al., 1992; Ball & Margulis, 2011), seemingly validating the assumption of negativity that permeates the discourse of control and discipline (see Holman et al., 2002; Sewell et al., 2011; Perkins, 2013).

4.2 Feedback source and content

Delving more deeply into the managers tasked with monitoring and, importantly, providing feedback to the employees, an assumption held by the majority of the informants which serves to lend credibility to the managers in their capacity as feedback sources can be identified. To illustrate, Ella recalls the following: "In the beginning, I blindly trusted the managers’ perceptions of my work effort, seeing as, you know, they were the professionals, they knew how it was supposed to be done". Likewise, Elvira makes reference to the managers’ having been customer service
agents in the past, allowing them to "understand the job" and thus be perceived as credible feedback sources. In other words, by virtue of their being relatively long-tenured members of the organizations, managers are assumed to be expert judges of employee performance. However, this does not necessarily apply to all managers, as suggested in the following:

I absolutely respect one of the managers ... she has worked here for a long time [and] is ambitious, so I respect her professional knowledge and have absolutely no problem with receiving feedback from her. This is not the case with the other manager, however, because she is not knowledgeable – she moves between different departments and this is just a stop-over for her. Nevertheless, she still partakes in the feedback sessions, which my colleagues and I think is very strange. (Leo)

I only find that one of the managers is competent, the one who delivers constructive feedback. I feel she is the person who knows how to deal with people – employees and customers alike. The other one is rougher and only gives me negative feedback, telling me to focus on quantity, not quality. I do not consider that competent. (John)

These statements demonstrate how managerial credibility and expertness as well as consensus among different managers and their familiarity with task demands all determine the potential of social persuasion by affecting the informant’s susceptibility to feedback (see Bandura, 1984, cited in Gist, 1987, p. 477; Bandura, 1997, p. 105). John also accentuates the influence of framing, along with the managers' delivery approaches and supervisory styles (for example, see Baron, 1988; Karl et al., 1993).

A managerial propensity to provide negative feedback can be detected in several of the organizations, especially in three of them. At Parking, claims Natalie, "the feedback mainly comes in the form of complaints. You mostly get to hear what is negative, rather than positive. One manager only addresses you when there is something negative to be said". The same tendency can be identified at B2B Payments, where Leo says "it feels as though they focus on the negative all the time ... even if your stats are good, they often choose to focus on the negative, so I have felt that the criticism is not justified very often". This perceived lack of fairness is shared
by Ella at Wide Variety Retailing, who thinks that the constant negative feedback becomes less and less justified; she knows that she has improved, yet receives no recognition for it; she feels that the managers "keep on whining just for the sake of whining". These informants substantiate the punitive and unresponsive characteristics of the organizations observed in the preceding section by exemplifying "monitoring used as a 'gotcha'" rather than an instrument of employee development (Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989, p. 812), or, to lean on Baron (1988), an inconsiderate delivery approach and destructive supervisory style seemingly inimical to social persuasion.

As intimated above, however, there are managers who adopt more considerate and constructive approaches, making the organizational environments appear less unresponsive and detrimental to self-efficacy (cf. Bandura, 1997, p. 21, 113). John mentions a manager who "is friendlier and always gives constructive feedback ... what to improve, which approach to have when talking to customers, [giving] me feedback that I can actually use". At Insurance, says Tina, the managers "follow the principle of giving two parts praise and one part criticism, and make sure that the negative feedback comes at the end of the session", akin to the "positive with a twist at the end" approach at Tech, as witnessed by Alex. Such benevolent approaches are also found at Furniture, Electric Utilities, Banking, and Appliances & Electronics, where feedback sessions are focused on employee development (following up on personal goals, planning for the future, etc.). Interestingly, whereas most informants receive both negative and positive feedback and find it constructive, Malin at Banking actually perceives her managers to be excessive in their exuberance:

The feedback is a bit too positive ... even fake. It is like, when they tell me that I am so good and doing such a great job, and then walk down the line and say the same thing to my co-workers, to everyone, [then] I do not feel special when the compliment and praise me. I would want the managers to be more honest in their delivery of feedback, because they can be perceived as false and inauthentic ... to be tougher and dare to express reproach.

First, these findings indicate the presence of an alternative managerial approach to delivering feedback; they demonstrate how EPM may indeed be used as an instrument of social persuasion, rather than "as a deterrent to negative behaviors" (Wells et al., 2007, p. 135) – how the "coercive supervisory style" centered on
problems and threats (Smith et al., 1981, cited in Ball & Margulis, 2011, p. 119) found in the discourse of control and discipline is not the only option in an EPM-permeated organizational context. Nevertheless, the prevalence of said supervisory style in the organizations under study is a testament to its enduring power, and serves to support the results of previous research (see Ball & Margulis, 2011).

Second, the findings not only attest to the potential benefits of providing positive feedback, but also in including negative or critically framed feedback in the process. The informants generally express a desire to improve and develop, and negative feedback is a key component in this process: "You have to get both positive and negative feedback, because otherwise you will not know whether you are doing well or bad. Positive feedback is not enough, because nobody is perfect", as Elvira phrases it. Thus, Wells et al.’s (2007, p. 134) recommendation to "use information gathered from the system to identify positive behavior and ... publicly recognize good performance, deemphasizing identification and correction of inappropriate behavior" should be treated with caution. Likewise, Karl et al.’s (1993, p. 379) conclusion that "the more positive the performance feedback received, the greater the increase in personal self-efficacy" need not necessarily hold true. If overly positive, the feedback may lose its potency.

4.3 Feedback recipient

The preceding section clearly suggests that managers who are deemed to be in possession of professional knowledge, familiarized with the task demands experienced by the employees, and associated with constructive approaches to delivering performance feedback earn a certain amount of the informants' trust and confidence. Managerial consensus was also shown to be a notable influencer; John at Books appears to place his in the manager who provides constructive feedback and prioritizes qualitative performance criteria, as opposed to the manager who solely dispenses negative feedback and has a penchant for quantitative criteria. Tina at Insurance implies that she is inclined to do the same, saying (with a trace of bitterness) that

there is a difference. I sit next to one of the managers, so she hears me talking to the customers and really likes the way I do my job, but there is another manager whom you barely even see, and who only sees the stats ...
so she tends to give more negative feedback than the person who actually hears and sees me.

These perceptions allude to the connection between managerial consensus on the one hand, and employee trust and confidence on the other (see Snyder et al., 1984; Bandura, 1997 p. 105), and to the aforementioned conflict between quantitative and qualitative performance criteria (see Irving et al., 1986; Smith et al., 1992). John, David, Johanna, and Alex all convey their frustration and confusion over these conflicting priorities, especially when management’s quantitative targets are unrealistically optimistic and the informants perceive themselves to be hopelessly engaged in a Sisyphean task, and when the managers emphasize the importance of "striking the golden balance" between these "paradoxical" quantitative and qualitative criteria, as Alex and David express it.

An additional aspect brought to the fore is appraisal disparity, and the defensive behaviors elicited when being confronted with appraisals from external agents that do not match one's self-image (Bandura, 1997, pp. 104-105; see also Ilgen et al., 1979; Forsythe & Johnson, 2017). While most informants feel that they are performing well when taking their time and empathizing with customers, incorporating their personalities into the job, managers nevertheless criticize them for failing to meet the quantitative performance criteria. Rather than being susceptible to this feedback, they engage in defensive behaviors by advocating their definitions of good service and criticizing management's conception of it. To exemplify, David opines that the focus on quantity is "ridiculous", and Johanna suggests that management should "measure the stats differently depending on the individual employee – if someone, for example, works very well under pressure, and someone else takes more time with the customers and so on, then it would be more constructive to adapt the monitoring accordingly".

As described in section 4.1, these negative attitudes toward quantitatively oriented EPM are held by most informants; Leo captures the prevailing view in the following manner: "We [employees and managers] are not on the same page – we do not prioritize the same things". Another way in which several informants express negative sentiments toward EPM is by characterizing the provision of feedback as a process of "whining". In a similar vein, Natalie, Ella and Malin perceive EPM to be infantilizing, drawing parallels to a mother yelling at her child, and to a schoolteacher keeping a
vigilant eye on the kids. As such, negative attitudes are readily observable, echoing previous research (for example, see Wells et al., 2007).

Laying part of the foundation for these attitudes is the introductory period during which employees are trained to become customer service agents. Although based on observational learning and combined with enactive mastery experience and social persuasion, signaling the optimal use of social persuasion as "a useful adjunct to more powerful efficacy-promoting influences" (Bandura, 1997, p. 106), this method of on-the-job training proved to be inadequate for all but two informants:

After the [two-week-long] introduction, I felt quite ready because I had a very solid foundation ... we have lists of abbreviations and scripts instructing us how to introduce ourselves, how to ask questions in order to understand what type of query is at hand ... follow-up questions and such. You also have your colleagues close by, so you can always ask them, and management has arranged it so that a more experienced employee sits between two less experienced ones. (Malin)

I actually had a strong fear of talking on the phone before I started working here, but the week-long training period, you know, during which we went through different systems, routines, the "dos and don'ts", and co-listening, which the customer service department works hard at, made me feel ready to take on the job. They also gave me a soft start ... answering questions about opening hours and so forth, and it progressed from there. (Elvira)

By way of contrast, the other informants received a few days' worth of introductory training and did not feel confident in their ability to succeed in their new roles; in other words, management "[placed] them prematurely in situations where they [were] likely to experience repeated failure" (Bandura, 1997: 106), which made them apprehensive and negatively predisposed toward EPM, expecting failure that would generate negative feedback.

4.4 Effects of feedback

Directing the analytical focus to the actual effects of feedback on employee self-efficacy, against the backdrop of the multitude of influencers discussed above, one theme is particularly noteworthy. Regardless of feedback sign (i.e., whether it is
positive or negative) and supervisory style, informants generally experience increased motivation and a commensurate increase in work effort. The following statements are illustrative:

It is more fun to work when you know you are doing well. The feedback has made me like the job and the workplace so much more, and I am a lot more motivated. I set higher personal goals and ... you do not want to disappoint [the managers]. (Malin)

Both positive and negative feedback increase my motivation, because when I get criticized, I become motivated to satisfy the critic and to try to keep the average call time down. It motivates me to make [management] stop criticizing me – I want to avoid negative feedback. Wanting to satisfy both managers, I know I have to make a greater effort regardless of what type of feedback I get. (John)

As detailed in section 4.2, the managers at Banking tend to give solely positive feedback to Malin; even though she previously expressed her disapproval of this excessive focus on the positive side of her work performance, she clearly experiences increased self-efficacy, engaging in constructive thought patterns and courses of action following social persuasion (see Bandura, 1997, p. 3, 101). Significantly, John, Tina, David, Alex, Johanna, and Elvira experience the same phenomenon, but receive both positive and negative feedback. Representing the other end of the spectrum, Natalie, who alleges that the managers of Parking never give her positive feedback, says that "you try to make it harder for them to criticize you, so in a way, you do work harder. Deep inside, you still hope to get some positive feedback". Another efficacy-boosting effect indicated by these informants pertains to their resilience, or "how long they persevere in the face of obstacles and failures" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3); instead of succumbing to the criticism, fair or unfair, and quitting altogether, as punitive environments are wont to encourage (e.g., Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989; Bandura, 1997, p. 21, 113), they endure – displaying commitment and inclination to reciprocate in the process (see Wells et al., 2007).

Although these beneficial effects may be observed in the majority of informants, Leo at B2B Payments and Ella at Wide Variety Retailing exhibit lower levels of self-efficacy, as evidenced by their dejected dispositions. When the feedback is constantly
negative, says Leo, "[it is] less fun to go to work, and you kind of start to question whether you have a future here, whether you can develop and if management believes in you"; he has become indifferent and "accepted the situation". Under similar conditions, Ella elaborates: "You feel bad, and never appreciated. It is as if you can never meet their expectations. The feedback only serves to make me less motivated". Consequently, the apathy and despondency connected to punitive, unresponsive and efficacy-depleting environments found in previous research (e.g., Smith et al., 1992; Rose & Wright, 2005; see also Bandura, 1997, p. 21, 113) are also discernible in the present study.

Granted, all informants attribute negative emotional states and pessimistic sentiments indicative of low self-efficacy (see Bandura, 2006, 2012) to the presence of EPM in one way or another. What these findings suggest, however, is that social persuasion has the potential to mitigate or compensate the negative influence seemingly inherent in monitoring – in accordance with extant research into the employee development discourse of EPM (e.g., Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989; Holman et al., 2002; Wells et al., 2007). As emphasized by several informants, the positive feedback and the entailing confidence boost compensate for the negative feedback.

Even those with the seemingly lowest self-efficacy levels are willing to accept negative feedback, provided it is interspersed with praise. Indeed, Natalie persists in an organizational environment that makes her "feel like Eeyore", the pessimistic and melancholy donkey in Winnie-the-Pooh, in the hopes of finally getting some positive feedback. While Leo and Ella appear to have lost most of that hope, they nevertheless speculate that their situations would improve markedly if they were to receive some praise and recognition for their efforts and capabilities; all the same, they do not insist on abandoning negative feedback altogether. In light of this generally high susceptibility to criticism, the aspect of delivery approach is accentuated once again. As long as the managers adopt a constructive approach (see Baron, 1988) that the informants do not perceive as "whining", negative feedback does not necessarily jeopardize the prospect of successful social persuasion.

Finally, the informants provide an additional qualification regarding the efficacy-increasing potential of negative feedback. Although they may become more motivated and increase their work effort after being criticized, they do not tend to experience increased well-being and optimism – areas also affected by self-efficacy (see Bandura,
1997, 2006, 2012). To exemplify, most informants invoke the word "sadness" when describing their emotional reactions to negative feedback; unsurprisingly, a certain amount of pessimism usually follows. Johanna conveys the general sentiment: "Naturally, it is always sad to hear that you have not performed as well as [the managers] want you to". In other words, positive feedback appears to increase self-efficacy more than negative feedback, seeing as the former also impacts positively on emotional states and the optimism/pessimism spectrum. Karl et al.’s (1993, p. 379) conclusion that "the more positive the performance feedback received, the greater the increase in personal self-efficacy" is thereby supported, albeit to a limited extent; again, excessive social persuasion might not be constructive.

5 Discussion

To recapitulate, the main findings of this study indicate that the informants operate in highly controlled and efficacy-depleting work environments with low levels of autonomy, where monitoring tends to be perceived as intense and disciplinary. Informants are subjected to different supervisory styles and approaches to delivering feedback – one focused on negative aspects of employee performance, one on positive aspects, and one combining them; the findings suggest that social persuasion may occur in this context as long as the first approach is avoided. Essentially, social persuasion has been shown to increase employee self-efficacy and ameliorate the efficacy-reducing effects of EPM.

The organizational contexts put under scrutiny in this study closely resemble the generic environment found in previous research, demonstrating how employees experience stress, low perceived levels of job satisfaction and personal control, negative emotional states, and pessimistic attitudes toward monitoring (e.g., Irving et al, 1986; Smith et al., 1992; Rose & Wright, 2005; Wells et al., 2007). Therefore, this study partly supports the assumption of negativity permeating the prevailing discourse of discipline and control in EPM research (Holman et al., 2002; Sewell et al., 2011; Perkins, 2013). Furthermore, by connecting these negative effects of EPM to the self-efficacy construct, this study confirms and provides a qualitative explanation to Jeske and Santuzzi’s (2015) observation that EPM also reduces employee self-efficacy, making EPM and social persuasion appear mutually exclusive.
However, by incorporating the more positive assumption pervading the alternative discourse of EPM focused on employee development, the present study suggests that EPM and social persuasion are in fact compatible. More specifically, it validates the results of previous studies that attest to the mitigating effects of performance feedback (see Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989; Holman et al., 2002; Wells et al., 2007) and finds that social persuasion has a similarly ameliorating effect on self-efficacy. Granted, the supervisory style that Baron (1988) describes as destructive and inconsiderate is discernible in the organizations studied herein, thereby illustrating how EPM is "introduced to find and detect fault" (Ball & Margulis, 2011, p. 119) and acts "as a deterrent to negative behaviors" (Wells et al., 2007, 135). Nonetheless, the study reveals the (often simultaneous) presence of more benevolent and considerate approaches to delivering feedback that satisfy the definition and meet the purpose of social persuasion. Consequently, it contrasts the dystopian image of EPM conveyed by the metaphors of "big brother", "panopticon", etc. (see Sarpong & Rees, 2014; Fernie & Metcalf, 1998), and thus remonstrates with Jeske and Santuzzi (2015), who found that feedback had no significant effect on self-efficacy.

Having found that both positive and negative feedback – even when the latter is delivered in an inconsiderate and punitive manner and therefore does not actually constitute social persuasion (cf. Bandura, 1997, p. 101; Dimotakis et al., 2017) – affect self-efficacy, Jeske and Santuzzi's (2015) finding becomes even more questionable. The notion that EPM is inimical to social persuasion is arguably dispelled by the fact that all the hallmarks of successful social persuasion are reflected in the vast majority of the call centers investigated in this study. Positive feedback has been shown to evoke positive emotional states, optimism and constructive thought patterns that motivate several customer service agents to make an effort and embark upon equally constructive courses of action; their beliefs and confidence in their personal capabilities have clearly been strengthened (see Bandura, 1997, 2006, 2012). Thus, although the call center appears to be an intrinsically efficacy-depleting environment in which the prospects of social persuasion are inauspicious, this study identifies certain conditions under which social persuasion is likely to be successful.

To elaborate, the findings indicate that constructive and positive feedback is superior to the more destructive and malevolent kind in terms of its effects on employee self-efficacy, as established by Baron (1988) and Karl et al. (1993); although the latter
form of feedback might increase the employee's motivation, effort and resilience, indicative of an efficacy-boost, a commensurately decrease in optimism and well-being (i.e., other areas influenced by self-efficacy) can be expected. In fact, constant negative feedback in an unresponsive and punitive environment does not necessarily increase self-efficacy at all; as the findings illustrate, solely negative effects such as despondency, decreased motivation and apathy are just as likely to be the result (see Bandura, 1997, p. 21). At first glance, this implies that "the more positive the performance feedback received, the greater the increase in personal self-efficacy" (Karl et al., 1993, p. 379). However, a key contribution of this study lies in the interrelated observations that (1) excessively positive feedback might be perceived as inauthentic, making the recipient lose faith in the source and become less susceptible to social persuasion, and that (2) negative feedback is perfectly acceptable, even desired, provided it is constructively framed.

Optimal social persuasion thereby seems to require that the managers adopt a benevolent delivery approach and combine positive and negative feedback; thus, managers should not just "use information gathered from the [EPM] system to identify positive behavior and ... publicly recognize good performance, deemphasizing identification and correction of inappropriate behavior" (Wells et al., 2007, p. 134). Following this line of reasoning, the argument that "the more positive the performance feedback received, the greater the increase in personal self-efficacy" (Karl et al., 1993, p. 379), and the heavy emphasis on giving positive feedback that permeates much of Bandura's work (e.g., Bandura, 1977, 1997) may be questioned.

Furthermore, this study confirms that the conflict between management's focus on quantitative performance criteria and employees' strong aversion to such measurements – a phenomenon duly noted in EPM research for over 30 years (e.g., Irving et al., 1986; Smith et al., 1992; Stanton, 2000) – remains a key issue in contemporary call centers. Incidentally, while Bandura (1997, p. 105) simply mentions the importance of managerial access to "objective" performance criteria in making employees susceptible to feedback, the quantitative/qualitative (rather than objective/subjective) dimension seems to be of greater importance in this regard. It also emerges as being more distressing and frustrating to employees than the perceived intensity of monitoring, which further contradicts Jeske and Santuzzi's (2015) findings and also that of Holman et al. (2002, p. 75), whose study
"demonstrated that it is the perceived intensity of monitoring that accounts for its negative effects". Juxtaposed with the present study, such an argument appears to be too categorical.

The seemingly omnipresent conflict of values between managers and employees brings another key finding of this study to the fore, namely that social persuasion can compensate for the effects of negative feedback. Considering that managers are quite unwilling to allow room for the qualitatively oriented service provision favored by employees (taking their time and empathizing with customers, etc.), or, leaning on Miraglia et al. (2017), to grant employees a certain amount of autonomy that allows them to experience a greater degree of personal control (cf. Smith et al., 1992; Carayon, 1994) and exercise their efficacy beliefs, and that employees continue to defend the alleged superiority of that approach, this conflict is likely to continue to generate negative feedback. However, as demonstrated in the present study, when the supervisory style described in the preceding section is utilized, the effects of this negative feedback are mitigated by social persuasion, which illustrates the strategic value of social persuasion in this context. Hence, if the conflict cannot be solved (which, as it has existed for more than 30 years, seems to be the case), social persuasion has the potential to ameliorate it.

Finally, in addressing Karl et al.'s (1993, p. 390) observation that "the self-efficacy of low self-efficacy individuals [is] more susceptible to influence from external cues than that of high self-efficacy individuals" and the entailing implication that employees with low self-efficacy levels might be more susceptible to social persuasion, it can be inferred from the findings that employees who are only subjected to negative feedback and therefore do not experience any social persuasion exhibit a yearning for positive feedback that is comparatively strong. After all, a powerful contrast is found in the employee who is more than sated with positive feedback and actually longs for negative feedback – this individual is clearly not as susceptible to social persuasion as those with lower self-efficacy levels. In view of the finding that EPM is fundamentally detrimental to self-efficacy (Jeske & Santuzzi, 2015) and thereby likely to generate a workforce in which low self-efficacy levels are the norm, this observation provides another example of the potential of utilizing social persuasion in this context.
6 Conclusion

6.1 Contribution and implications

Aiming to arrive at a deeper understanding of the relationship between performance feedback and self-efficacy in the context of EPM, this study has investigated the concept of social persuasion, or feedback aimed at increasing self-efficacy, and found that EPM, although inherently detrimental to self-efficacy, is not antithetical to social persuasion, the latter having been found to occur in the vast majority of organizations. It has been demonstrated that social persuasion has the potential to mitigate the efficacy-depleting effects of EPM, in line with the employee development discourse of EPM (see Chalykoff & Kochan, 1989; Holman et al., 2002; Wells et al., 2007). However, the destructive supervisory styles and monitoring purposes that can be described as disciplinary and even punitive found in several organizations lend partial support to the results of previous research within the dominant discourse of control and discipline, and its underlying assumption of negativity (see Sewell et al., 2011; Perkins, 2013).

Based on these findings, the question of how customer service agents perceive and experience social persuasion when subjected to electronic performance monitoring may be answered. Employees who only receive negative feedback from their managers, the latter thus exhibiting the coercive and destructive supervisory style noted in previous research into EPM (see Ball & Margulis, 2011), neither perceive nor experience any social persuasion. Displaying the lowest self-efficacy levels among the employees interviewed for this study, these individuals seem only to experience the negative effects of EPM. At the other extreme, when feedback is solely positive, social persuasion may be perceived as excessive and inauthentic, with potentially dire ramifications for employee trust and confidence in the managers, and for the employee’s susceptibility to further social persuasion. Hence, a well-balanced mixture of positive and negative feedback appears to be the delivery approach most conducive to successful social persuasion in this empirical context, as perceived and experienced by the majority of informants.

Having conducted this qualitative investigation into workers' personal viewpoints and thereby generated "interesting and worthwhile insights into the psychological reality of monitored employees" (Stanton, 2000, p. 108), a set of theoretical
implications might be offered. The study indicates that the dominant discourse of control and discipline only manages to provide a one-dimensional perspective on EPM, thus disregarding one of its key features – performance feedback. While confirming the efficacy-reducing effects of EPM noted by Jeske and Santuzzi (2015), and indirectly found by Chalykoff and Kochan (1989), Holman et al. (2002) and Wells et al. (2007), the study illuminates the mitigating influence of social persuasion and thus contradicts the results of Jeske and Santuzzi (2015), thereby extending the developmental discourse of EPM. Moreover, having observed that management’s overemphasis on quantitative performance criteria (see Irving et al., 1986; Smith et al., 1992) seems more important to employees than the intensity of monitoring, this study further contradicts Jeske and Santuzzi (2015) and Holman et al. (2002).

Also, the key findings that social persuasion may lose its potency when comprised of solely positive feedback, and that employees consider negative feedback necessary and even desirable, caution against Wells et al.’s (2007) advice to maximize the focus on positive feedback and minimize negative feedback. Within the theoretical realm of self-efficacy, these findings question Karl et al.’s (1993) argument positing that the more positive the feedback, the greater the increase in self-efficacy; similarly, they imply that the heavy emphasis on positivity reflected in this literature (for example, see Bandura, 1977, 1997) might be slightly misleading.

The findings also offer practical implications, the most important of which being the strategic potential of social persuasion. Given that managers seem likely to maintain their predilection for quantitative performance criteria, and that employees are equally adamant in advocating their qualitatively oriented definitions of service provision, the compensatory effect of positive feedback could be used to mitigate the negative effects of criticism based on quantitative criteria. Although it does not reconcile the underlying ideological differences, social persuasion via both positive and negative feedback would seem to be more constructive than simply berating the employees; indeed, the importance of including positive feedback is particularly accentuated when the intended recipient is subjected to EPM.

Even greater increases in self-efficacy may perhaps be gained through "interventions directly aimed at strengthening workers' self-efficacy" (Miraglia et al., 2017, p. 268), such as increased autonomy that enables employees to improvise and incorporate their personalities into the job, or longer introductory training periods (see Bandura,
but as long as the managers adhere to their quantitative priorities and employee self-efficacy remains a secondary concern, social persuasion offers, at the very least, a method by which the negative impact of said priorities might be assuaged.

6.2 Future research

Intimated in the preceding section and in the methodological limitations discussed in the third chapter are a few implications for future research. First, having found that negative feedback can also increase motivation and effort, indicative of a self-efficacy boost, alternative theories of self-regulation – such as goal theory, control theory and negative discrepancy theory (see Bandura, 1997, pp. 128-133) – may offer interesting insights into this phenomenon.

Second, an in-depth investigation into the conflict between management's predilection for quantitatively oriented EPM and employees' opposition toward this approach is warranted, in light of its pervasive influence on the employer-employee relationship. More generally, given the exclusive focus on employee perceptions and experiences adopted in the present study, future research may benefit from incorporating a managerial perspective.

Third, the prospect of excessive social persuasion merits further scrutiny; as indicated by the present study, although mainly based on the perceptions and experiences of one employee, too much positive feedback may (ironically) impact negatively on self-efficacy.

Fourth, the author identifies an opportunity in the original research design intended for this study. A single case study could compensate for the loss of within-case depth by incorporating multiple perspectives from a single organization; the intricacies of social persuasion in the context of EPM could thus be illuminated even further.
References


Appendix: Interview guide

1. As a customer service agent, what are your main tasks and responsibilities?

2. How would you describe your work environment?

3. Are you confident in your ability to do your job?  
   If yes/no, then  
   – Why/why not?

4. What type of training did you receive when you started?

5. Does the company have a policy dictating how you should interact with customers?  
   If yes, then  
   – What does it stipulate?  
   – How is good/bad performance rewarded/punished, if at all?

6. Do you perceive that you can influence your work environment and the way you do your job?  
   If yes, then  
   – In what ways?  
   If no, then  
   – Why not?

7. Has management explained the purpose of monitoring your work?  
   If yes, then  
   – What is that purpose?

8. How often are you monitored?

9. How do you feel about being monitored?

10. How do you feel about receiving feedback after your performance has been monitored?

11. Has your attitude toward monitoring and feedback changed in any way?  
    If yes, then  
    – How so?

12. How frequently do you receive feedback?

13. Do you trust and have confidence in the managers providing it?  
    If yes/no, then  
    – Why/why not?

14. Do you think that the managers have credibility and expertise?  
    If yes/no, then  
    – Why/why not?
15. Do you recall any specific feedback you have received?  
If yes, then  
– What was it and how did it make you feel?  
– What did you think about the manager’s delivery approach?  
– How did it match your own perceptions of your performance?

16. Does the feedback tend to be positive or negative?

17. Do different managers have different opinions about your performance?  
If yes/no, then  
– What do you think about that?

18. How has the feedback you have received affected your beliefs and confidence in your ability to do your job?

19. Specifically, how has the feedback influenced  
– Your motivation?  
– The amount of effort you put into work?  
– Your ability to cope with obstacles, challenges, failures and adversity?  
– Your emotional state?

20. Has it served to make you more optimistic or pessimistic at work?

21. If you were to change anything about the monitoring and/or feedback system, what would it be and why?