

## Student Communication Satisfaction, Similarity, and Liking as a Function of Attributional Confidence

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*The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between student attributional confidence about an instructor and student perceptions of communication satisfaction, teacher similarity, and teacher liking under an Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) framework. Participants were 147 students who reported on an instructor from their previous class. Results indicated positive relationships between student attributional confidence about the instructor and student communication satisfaction, perceptions of instructor similarity, and liking for an instructor. These findings provide support for URT in the instructional context.*

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT; Berger & Calabrese, 1975) is one of the most enveloping theories in terms of relational progression. Although initially designed to explain initial interactions, URT has been extended (Neuliep & Grohskopf, 2000; Parks & Adelman, 1983) beyond initial interactions and has been applied to ongoing relationships (Berger, 1988; Planalp, Rutherford, & Honeycutt, 1988). The theory is centered around the idea that when strangers first meet, their primary concern is

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reducing uncertainty, which is synonymous with increasing predictability (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). This desire to reduce uncertainty leaves individuals with the task of predicting the behavior and actions of the person with whom they are communicating.

To increase predictability, individuals make proactive attributions (Claterbuck, 1979). Proactive attributions are predictions about future behaviors an individual may employ. Claterbuck (1979) suggested that individuals formulate possible behavioral options about an individual amongst a broad spectrum of possible responses in an interaction. These formulations are a result of prior knowledge and experiences through previous communication encounters. Essentially, individuals have reduced a particular level of uncertainty through previous interactions and are able to predict future communication encounters (proactive attributions). Attributional confidence, then, can be considered the level of certainty (or uncertainty) an individual has toward another person.

Although interpersonal scholars have studied relational development in terms of URT, communication scholars have not extensively studied uncertainty reduction within the instructional context. However, communication scholars have begun to use general interpersonal theories within the instructional context (Avtgis, 2001) and the teacher-student relationship is considered to be a form of an interpersonal relationship (Frymier & Houser, 2000). According to Frymier and Houser (2000), the teacher-student relationship is unique but shares several similarities with other interpersonal relationships. These similarities include (a) teaching is a relational process that goes through stages, (b) interpersonal communication is needed to achieve outcomes, (c) the achievement of student goals rests on resolve conflict via communication, and (d) communication is a central component in the relationship. Frymier and Houser (2000) suggested that teacher-student communication is both relational and content driven.

Considering the features of the teacher-student relationship, it seems warranted to study this relationship in terms of proactive attributions and uncertainty. Communication satisfaction, homophily, and liking are all important outcomes under the URT framework and are inherent in the theory. Specifically, these

variables constitute one third of the testable axioms in URT.

### *Communication Satisfaction*

Communication satisfaction is an affective response to the accomplishment of communication goals and expectations (Hecht, 1978a). Generally, the more two individuals become intimate, the more they report being satisfied with communication (Hecht & Martson, 1987). The teacher-student relationship most notably is centered around student goals and expectations. According to Hecht (1978a) reinforcement must be present for satisfaction to be present. This notion is central to understanding communication satisfaction. Communication satisfaction results when positive expectations are fulfilled (Hecht, 1978a).

Communication satisfaction is dependent on whatever expectations individuals have about an interaction. In a theory extension study, Neuliep and Grohshopf (2000) proposed that communication satisfaction was a plausible outcome of uncertainty reduction considering the prosocial nature of the theory. They discovered a positive linear relationship between communication satisfaction and uncertainty reduction. Their results led to a 9<sup>th</sup> axiom in URT that states “*during initial interaction, as uncertainty decreases, communication satisfaction increases*” (Neuliep & Grohshopf, 2000).

This axiom has received support in initial interactions. However, Hecht (1978b) suggested that communication satisfaction is largely contextual. Similarly, Neuliep and Grohshopf (2000) argued that further research concerning communication satisfaction and uncertainty reduction is necessary. The context influences what expectations are considered normative or operative because communication satisfaction is an affective response to the fulfillment of expectations (Neuliep & Grohshopf, 2000). The instructional context has yet to be studied in respect to communication satisfaction and uncertainty reduction.

This study attempts to extend previous work on uncertainty reduction and communication satisfaction as proposed by Neuliep and Grohshopf (2000) by exploring the instructional context. Based on the URT axioms, students should reduce uncertainty about an instructor for prosocial reasons. When students make proactive attributions about an instructor, they should have less

uncertainty about the instructor and should report more satisfying communication encounters. Considering that attributional confidence is a direct measure of uncertainty (Clatterbuck, 1979), the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: *A positive relationship will exist between student attributional confidence about an instructor and communication satisfaction with that instructor.*

### *Similarity/Homophily*

Homophily is conceptualized as the amount of similarity two people perceive themselves as having (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1971). By definition, homophily can include any type of similarity two people share including attitudes, beliefs, background, demographics, and physical attributes.

Individuals are more willing to communicate when they perceive homophily with others (McCroskey, Hamilton, & Weiner, 1974). Similarly, students are likely to reveal themselves to instructors who are perceived as similar (Wheless, 1974). Furthermore, Rogers and Bhowmik (1971) proposed that when two individuals see themselves as similar, they are more likely to communicate with one another, understand one another, and engage in future interaction. Homophily has been suggested to be an important element in instruction (Rocca & McCroskey, 1999). In the instructional setting, teachers have a significant influence over student perceptions of homophily. Perceived student attitude and background homophily with a teacher are correlated positively with immediacy and correlated negatively with verbal aggressiveness (Rocca & McCroskey). Homophily research supports the notion that students will reduce uncertainty with an instructor when they perceive themselves as similar to an instructor. Moreover, axiom 6 of URT proposes that “*similarities between persons reduce uncertainty, while dissimilarities produce increases in uncertainty*” (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Theoretically, students should have less uncertainty about a teacher when they believe the teacher is similar to them. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2a: *A positive relationship will exist between student attributional confidence about an instructor and perceived attitude homophily.*

H2b: *A positive relationship will exist between student attributional confidence about a instructor and perceived background homophily.*

### *Liking*

One of the most common desires individuals have is the need to be liked (Rubin, 1973). Liking is considered the degree of positive evaluation and respect toward another person (Rubin, 1973). Liking has received some attention from instructional communication scholars. In early work in the instructional arena, Hendrikson (1940) concluded that students who are liked are judged to be better speakers. More recently, Frymier (1994) discovered that the affinity-seeking strategies of assuming equality, dynamism, and facilitating enjoyment are the most predictive strategies a teacher can employ to increase student liking. Stafford (2003) considers liking to be one of the main features of interpersonal relationships (pg. 66). Liking can be both increased (Hinkle, 1999) and decreased (Myers & Johnson, 2003) by communication behaviors.

The desire to reduce uncertainty is associated with liking. In axiom 7 in URT, Berger and Calabrese (1975) propose: “*increases in uncertainty level produce decreases in liking; decreases in uncertainty level produce increases in liking*”. People usually like individuals they know more about and dislike individuals more when is uncertainty present. Under the URT framework, individuals have the choice to reduce uncertainty and do so when motivated. This is congruent with the notion that students will attempt to reduce uncertainty about an instructor they like and will not tend to proceed learning more about an instructor they dislike. Students who communicate with an instructor and engage in the uncertainty reduction process should like an instructor more than students who have little attributional confidence about an instructor. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: *A positive relationship will exist between student attributional confidence about an instructor and liking for the instructor.*

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 147 undergraduate students (70 men, 75 women, 2 unreported) enrolled in an introductory communication studies course who were attending a large northeastern university. Ages ranged from 18 to 23 years ( $M = 19.24$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ).

### *Procedures and Measurement*

Participants completed a survey that assessed their attributional confidence of their instructor from the last class they attended, along with their general communication satisfaction with their instructor, perceived background and attitude homophily, and liking for the instructor. Students reported on the instructor from their last class to obtain more variability of instructors and classes (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986). The survey included: the Attributional Confidence Scale (Clatterbuck, 1979), the Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Inventory (Hecht, 1978a), the Perceived Homophily Measure (McCroskey, Richmond, & Daly, 1975), and the Liking Scale (Rubin, 1970).

The *Attributional Confidence Scale* is 7 items and measures proactive attributional confidence which has been used as a way of operationalizing uncertainty in the URT framework (Clatterbuck, 1979). It uses a percentage response format ranging from 0% to 100% with a higher percentage indicating more proactive attributional confidence for the reported individual. Previous reliability coefficients have been .82 (Avtgis, 2001) and .87 (Avtgis, 2003). In this study, the obtained Cronbach alpha was .81 ( $M = 464.85$ ,  $SD = 132.62$ ).

The *Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Inventory* is 19 items and measures the communication satisfaction an individual has when referring to a previous conversation. It uses a 7-point Likert response format ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Previous reliability coefficients have been .90 (Hubbard, 2001) and .94 (Wheeless, Wheeless, & Baus, 1984). This scale was modified to measure individual perceptions of

communication satisfaction in general with a specific teacher. In this study, a Cronbach alpha of .89 ( $M = 90.19$ ,  $SD = 18.37$ ) was obtained.

The *Perceived Homophily Measure* is 8 items and measures both attitude and background homophily. It uses a 7-point semantic differential format. Previous reliability coefficients have been .88 for the attitude homophily subscale and .71 for the background homophily subscale (Elliot, 1979). Allen and Post (2004) reported estimates of .86 and .73 respectively. In this study, obtained Cronbach alphas were .82 ( $M = 15.97$ ,  $SD = 5.42$ ) for the attitude homophily subscale and .72 ( $M = 14.84$ ,  $SD = 5.10$ ) for the background homophily subscale.

The *Liking Scale* is 13 items and measures general feelings of liking toward a specific individual. It uses a 7-point Likert response format ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Previous reliability coefficients have been .92 (Myers & Johnson, 2003) and .95 (Hinkle, 2001). In this study, a Cronbach alpha of .92 ( $M = 61.72$ ,  $SD = 15.15$ ) was obtained.

## Results

All four hypotheses were supported. A series of positive correlations were discovered between proactive attributional confidence for an instructor and student communication satisfaction ( $r = .55$ ,  $p < .01$ ), attitude homophily ( $r = .50$ ,  $p < .01$ ), background homophily ( $r = .25$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and liking for an instructor ( $r = .50$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

This study explored the relationship between student attributional confidence about an instructor and student perceptions of communication satisfaction, instructor similarity, and instructor liking. The results suggest that student communication satisfaction and perceptions of instructor similarity and liking are correlated positively with a student's attributional confidence about a teacher. Furthermore, these findings suggest that reduced uncertainty is associated with prosocial outcomes in the classroom. Moreover, URT received support in the instructional context with findings reflecting the teacher-student dyad.

Axioms 6, 7, and 9 of URT were supported in the instructional context. Students who had greater attributional confidence for an instructor reported more communication satisfaction. Students who had greater attributional confidence for an instructor felt they shared more similar attitudes and background characteristics with that instructor. Students also reported liking an instructor more when they were less uncertain about the instructor. These findings are congruent with URT and provide more support for the use of the theory across different contexts.

Collectively, these findings suggest the importance of the uncertainty reduction process in instruction. Results suggest that numerous prosocial outcomes are associated with uncertainty reduction in the classroom. First, students are more likely to experience satisfaction when communicating with an instructor. Satisfying communication should be a desired outcome for instructors. When students are less satisfied with any facet of the teacher-student relationship, problems may arise such as negative evaluation. Second, students are more likely to perceive themselves as similar to an instructor when uncertainty is reduced. This perceived similarity is important as it can open up future communication channels. Research suggests that individuals are more willing to communicate with people they perceive as similar (McCroskey et al., 1974). In the classroom, this notion is very important. Students may be more willing to communicate with an instructor who they believe is similar to them. Therefore, it is possible that more questions are asked, more content is clarified, and more participation is possible solely based on this perception of similarity. Third, students like teachers more when uncertainty is reduced. Being liked is desired by most individuals (Rubin, 1973). This is no different as far as instructors are concerned. If students like an instructor, it is possible that the classroom environment may be more positive, students will attend class more, students will be more enthusiastic, and students may take the instructor again in the future. All of these communicative implications may be traced back to the uncertainty reduction process.

These findings are pragmatic in an instructional sense. Instructors may influence communication satisfaction along with perceptions of similarity and liking in the classroom. These findings suggest that instructors should try to increase students'

attributional confidence about them for these prosocial associations. This could be achieved in two ways.

First, instructors could be consistent in their classroom communication behaviors, grading policies, and teaching style. If students view systematic regularity in an instructor, they will be able to predict future behaviors of that instructor, thus increasing attributional confidence. Students expect fairness and consistency from an instructor (Shelton, Lane, & Waldhart, 1999). Consistent instructors have the power to reduce student uncertainty about many aspects of the classroom. Second, instructors can increase student attributional confidence by providing clear expectations about classroom policies and behavior. Teacher clarity should be a goal for general classroom understanding (Simonds, 1997a). This can aid the uncertainty reduction process and provide students with a clear basis for adhering to instructor expectations. Having clear expectations for students can foster a superior instructional environment. Student challenge behaviors are often the result of information seeking which results from uncertainty in the classroom (Simonds, 1997b). Therefore, reducing student uncertainty and remaining clear is an important goal for instructors.

There are two limitations to this study. First, although the teacher-student relationship was treated as an interpersonal relationship, it can be argued that the teacher-student relationship is more of an impersonal relationship. Not all classrooms, especially large lecture formats, foster communication between a teacher and student. Second, the frequency of communication between the instructor and student was not measured. Without the frequency of teacher-student interactions, it is impossible to explain if participants were using a single or multiple conversations with a teacher as a reference point for reporting on communication satisfaction.

Future research should continue to explore uncertainty reduction relationships in the instructional context. It would be interesting to know if all of the URT axioms are supported in the classroom. Events that increase uncertainty in personal relationships have been studied (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Planalp et al., 1988). It would prove interesting to study events that increase uncertainty in the classroom. Additionally, researchers

should continue to extend URT and provide new axioms which help explain the uncertainty reduction process.

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