Student Motives for Communicating with Instructors as a Function of Perceived Instructor Misbehaviors

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The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which student motives for communicating with an instructor (i.e., relational, functional, participatory, excuse-making, and sycophancy) were associated with perceived instructor misbehaviors (i.e., incompetence, indolence, and offensiveness). Participants were 265 students who completed a questionnaire consisting of the Student Communication Motives Scale and the Teacher Misbehaviors Scale in reference to a class they had attended prior to data collection. Results of canonical correlation analysis revealed that (a) students who perceived their instructors as offensive, indolent, and, to a lesser extent, incompetent, were unmotivated to communicate for the functional motive; and (b) students who perceived their instructors as incompetent were unmotivated to communicate for the relational, participatory, and sycophancy motives, and, to a lesser extent, the functional and excuse-making motives.

Keywords: Instructional Communication; Student Motives for Communicating; Teacher Misbehavior

Current research suggests that quality college instructor–student relationships are developed using several communicative behaviors that are essential in any functional interpersonal relationship. These behaviors, among others, include self-disclosure

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(Cayanus & Martin, 2008), affinity seeking (Myers, Martin, & Knapp, 2005), and confirmation (Goodboy & Myers, 2008). Because college students are interested in developing an interpersonal relationship with their instructors (Waldeck, 2007), it is imperative that college instructors engage in positive, confirming, and prosocial forms of communication with their students. Yet, not all instructors do so and, in fact, may even engage in antisocial behaviors, which further impedes the development of the instructor–student relationship. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine one form of antisocial communication in the classroom (i.e., instructor misbehaviors) in tandem with the motives students have for communicating with their instructors.

Based on work conducted by Rubin, Perse, and Barbato (1988), Martin, Myers, and Mottet (1999) identified five motives that students indicate drive their need to communicate with an instructor. These motives are *relational* (i.e., to develop an interpersonal relationship), *functional* (i.e., to obtain information about the course or content), *participatory* (i.e., to contribute questions or comments in class), *excuse-making* (i.e., to explain why course assignments are incomplete or inadequate), and *sycophancy* (i.e., to create a favorable impression). These five motives are related to students' educational outcomes. For instance, students who communicate for the relational, functional, and participatory motives report gains in their cognitive learning, affective learning, and communication satisfaction (Goodboy, Martin, & Bolkan, 2009; Martin, Mottet, & Myers, 2000), whereas students who experience academic-related stress but report low anxiety, in general, communicate for the functional motive (Martin, Cayanus, Weber, & Goodboy, 2006). Learning-oriented students communicate outside of class with instructors for relational reasons, whereas grade-oriented students communicate outside of class for excuse-making and sycophantic reasons (Williams & Frymier, 2007).

Aside from their educational outcomes, much of the research conducted on students' motives for communicating with their instructors has focused on the link between these motives and instructors' perceived communicative behaviors. Collectively, these actions are positive and prosocial, which may suggest to students that when instructors use these behaviors, they are interested in establishing a relationship with them. These behaviors include perceived use of nonverbal and verbal immediacy (Gendrin & Rucker, 2007), confirmation (Goodboy & Myers, 2008), use of verbal approach strategies (Mottet, Martin, & Myers, 2004), socio-communicative style (Myers, Martin, & Mottet, 2002), use of self-disclosure (Cayanus, Martin, & Goodboy, 2009) and humor (Dunleavy, 2006), use of functional communication skills (Myers & Bryant, 2005), and use of prosocial behavioral alteration techniques (Martin, Heisel, & Valencic, 2000).

However, when instructors engage in antisocial communication with their students, students may no longer be as motivated to communicate with them. As Myers, Edwards, Wahl, and Martin (2007) reported, perceived instructor verbal aggressiveness is correlated negatively with the relational, functional, and

participatory motives and positively with the excuse-making motive. Similar relationships may emerge when instructors engage in misbehaviors, which refer to instructor classroom behaviors that interfere with instruction and learning (Kearney, Plax, Hays, & Ivey, 1991). Kearney et al. identified three broad categories of misbehaviors in which instructors engage: incompetence, indolence, and offensiveness. Incompetent instructors lack effective teaching skills and do not appear to care about their students (e.g., giving boring lectures, grading unfairly, or not knowing the subject matter). Indolent instructors are lazy and absentminded (e.g., returning assignments late or never, changing set due dates, or being disorganized). Offensive instructors tend to communicate in mean and intimidating ways (e.g., embarrassing students, insulting students, or acting superior).

Research suggests that teacher misbehaviors are inversely associated with students' learning outcomes such as cognitive learning, affective learning, and state motivation (Banfield, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006; Goodboy & Bolkan, 2009; Zhang, 2007). Furthermore, when instructors misbehave, students consider them to lack credibility (Banfield et al., 2006; Semlak & Pearson, 2008; Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998) and are more likely to resist their compliance attempts (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

Relational power and instructional influence theory (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006) is one way in which the association between student motives for communicating with instructors and instructor misbehaviors can be explained. This theory advances three propositions to explain how power and influence affect communication between instructors and students. First, the instructor–student relationship is interpersonal in nature and involves social influence. Second, instructors and students influence each other by conceding power to one another in that prosocial power use yields long-term influence, and antisocial power use yields short-term influence. Third, the relational quality of the instructor–student relationship is influenced by the verbal or nonverbal messages that are conveyed between parties; quality is increased when instructors and students use appropriate communication behaviors, and is decreased when instructors and students use inappropriate behaviors. Based on this theoretical perspective, instructor misbehaviors are inappropriate behaviors that constitute an abuse of power, reduce student affect for an instructor, and weaken student confidence. Because students who form a high-quality interpersonal relationship with an instructor are likely to communicate for functional, relational, participatory, and sycophancy motives (Myers, 2006), we suspect that students who are enrolled in courses with instructors who misbehave will be unmotivated to communicate with these instructors. To test this idea, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> H1: *Student motives for communicating with an instructor (i.e., functional, relational, participatory, excuse-making, and sycophancy) are inversely related with perceived instructor misbehaviors (i.e., incompetence, indolence, and offensiveness).*

Method

Participants

Participants were 265 undergraduate students enrolled in one of numerous introductory or upper-level communication courses at a mid-sized Eastern university. Participants were 93 men and 166 women (6 unreported) whose ages ranged from 18 to 45 years ($M = 19.62$, $SD = 1.99$). Participants reported on 127 male instructors and 121 female instructors (17 unreported). Approximately 48% ($n = 127$) of participants referenced a class in their chosen major. Two hundred-two ($n = 202$) participants reported on a class size of 30 students or less, 40 reported on a class size between 31 to 100 students, 19 reported on a class between 101 to 200 students, and 2 reported on a class size of over 200 students (2 unreported).

Procedures and Instrumentation

Participants completed a questionnaire as part of a larger study that included the Student Communication Motives Scale (Martin, Mottet, & Myers, 2000) and Teacher Misbehavior Scale (Kearney et al., 1991), along with demographic items. Participants completed the instruments in reference to the instructor and course they attended immediately prior to the data collection (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986). Data were collected during the last two weeks of the semester to ensure that participants were familiar with their instructors' classroom behaviors and had formed stable impressions.

The Student Communication Motives Scale is composed of 30 items and asks participants to report on their reasons for communicating with their instructor; reasons include relational, functional, participatory, excuse-making, and sycophancy. Sample items include, ''I talk to my instructor: 'to build a personal relationship' (relational), 'to clarify the material' (functional), 'to explain why work is late' (excuse-making), 'because my instructor values class participation' (participatory), and 'to pretend I am interested in the course' (sycophancy).'' Responses were solicited using a 5-point Likert-type response format, ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*exactly like me*). Previous reliability coefficients have been .91 for the relational subscale, .89 for the functional subscale, .88 for the participatory subscale, .90 for the excuse-making subscale, and .88 for the sycophancy subscale (Goodboy & Myers, 2008). In this study, obtained Cronbach's alphas for the motives ranged from .85 to .92 (relational: $M = 11.77$, $SD = 5.13$, $\alpha = .92$; functional: $M = 20.55$, $SD = 5.94$, $\alpha = .92$; participatory: $M = 14.75$, $SD = 5.88$, $\alpha = .90$; excuse-making: $M = 12.43$, $SD = 5.51$, $\alpha = .88$; and sycophancy: $M = 12.27$, $SD = 4.99$, $\alpha = .85$).

The Teacher Misbehavior Scale is 28 items and measures a variety of teacher misbehaviors uncovered by Kearney et al. (1991). This scale uses a 5-point Likert-type response format, ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Previously, three factors have been identified for this scale, which comprise 21 of the 28 items (Kearney et al., 1991): offensiveness (sarcasm and putdowns, verbal abuse, unreasonable and arbitrary rules, sexual harassment, negative personality, and favoritism or prejudice),

indolence (absent, tardy, unprepared or disorganized, deviates from syllabus, late returning work, and information underload), and incompetence (confusing or unclear lectures, apathetic to students, unfair testing, boring lectures, information overload, does not know subject matter, foreign or regional accents, inappropriate volume, and bad grammar or spelling). Previous reliability coefficients have been .80 for offensiveness, .67 for indolence, and .83 for incompetence (Kelsey, Kearney, Plax, Allen, & Ritter, 2004). In this study, the obtained Cronbach's alphas were .80 for offensiveness ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 3.48$), .80 for indolence ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 3.74$), and .87 for incompetence ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 5.64$).

Results

To test the hypothesis, canonical correlation analysis was employed. The five student communication motives (i.e., relational, participatory, functional, excuse-making, and sycophancy) comprised the first set of variables, and the three dimensions of instructor misbehaviors (i.e., incompetent, offensive, and indolence) comprised the second set of variables. Following the advice of Lambert and Durand (1975), only canonical correlates that reached the .30 level were examined. Two significant roots were obtained (Wilks's $\Lambda = .83$), $F(15, 682) = 3.13$, $p < .001$ (see Table 1). The first root ($R_c = .34$) revealed that when students perceive their instructors as offensive, indolent and, to a lesser extent, incompetent, they are unmotivated to communicate with their instructors for functional reasons. The second root ($R_c = .24$) revealed that when students perceive their instructors as incompetent, they are unmotivated to communicate with their instructors for relational, participatory, and sycophantic reasons and, to a much lesser extent, for excuse-making and functional reasons.

Table 1 Canonical Correlation Analysis

Variable	Canonical Loadings	
	R_{c1}	R_{c2}
Set 1: Student motives to communicate		
Relational	−.10	−.96
Participatory	.08	−.69
Functional	−.76	−.30
Excuse-making	.28	−.33
Sycophancy	.23	−.62
Redundancy coefficient	[.14]	[.39]
Set 2: Instructor misbehaviors		
Incompetence	.70	.70
Offensiveness	.92	.10
Indolence	.87	−.14
Redundancy coefficient	[.08]	[.01]

Note. Wilks's $\Lambda = .83$; $F(15, 682) = 3.13$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate if students' motives for communicating with their instructors were influenced by perceived instructor misbehaviors. Results of a canonical correlation analysis revealed two findings. The first finding was that students reported they were not motivated to communicate for functional reasons when their instructor was perceived as offensive and indolent and, to a lesser extent, incompetent. This finding reinforces the literature on instructor verbal aggressiveness in the classroom. When instructors are perceived by students as engaging in mean or hurtful behavior, student learning and classroom outcomes are minimized. For instance, instructors who are verbally aggressive in class promote a defensive classroom climate (Myers & Rocca, 2001); are perceived as less credible and understanding (Edwards & Myers, 2007; Schrodt, 2003); and reduce student reports of state motivation, and affective learning (Myers & Knox, 2000; Myers & Rocca, 2001). Indeed, instructors who are simultaneously offensive and indolent (and somewhat incompetent) appear to mirror verbally aggressive professors. Therefore, it is no surprise that students who dislike a misbehaving instructor may be unmotivated to approach that instructor for functional reasons (e.g., to ask questions about an assignment, to pose questions in class, or to ask for help or advice). Perhaps, students may avoid the instructor and, instead, turn to peers in the class to gain information about the course and the content. Again, this notion is congruent with the verbal aggressiveness literature. Myers et al. (2007) found that students enrolled in courses with verbally aggressive instructors engage in less out-of-class communication with these instructors than do students whose instructors are not verbally aggressive. Similarly, McPherson and Young (2004) discovered that students believe that teacher anger is a result of student-related problems and actions. Therefore, students may feel uncomfortable approaching teachers who are perceived as simultaneously offensive, indolent, and incompetent to obtain classroom information if they believe the instructor will react unfavorably. Results of this study suggest that instructors who are seen as misbehaving across all three dimensions are doing a disservice to their students—that is, students do not report approaching them with class related quandaries.

The second finding was that students reported being unmotivated to communicate for the relational, participatory, and sycophancy motives and, to a lesser extent, the excuse-making and functional motives, when an instructor was perceived as incompetent. This result suggests that students do not want to get to know incompetent instructors, both in and out of the classroom. Recall that incompetent instructors tend to be perceived as confusing, apathetic, unfair, boring, ineffective, and as not knowing the subject matter being taught (Kearney et al., 1991). Arguably, incompetent teachers lack expert power (i.e., students do not perceive the instructor as competent and knowledgeable) or referent power (i.e., students do not want to identify with the instructor). Students would be hesitant to build an interpersonal relationship with such a professor. Students who perceive an instructor to lack expertise report lower ratings of instruction (Roach, 1999), whereas students who perceive an instructor to lack referent power report low levels of learner

empowerment (Schrodt et al., 2008) and more negative evaluations of the instructor (Schrodt, Witt, & Turman, 2007). Students tend to dislike instructors who lack either base of power (Richmond, 1990). Therefore, in support of relational power and instructor influence theory (Mottet et al., 2006), misbehaving instructors may be neglecting important bases of power that are known to promote student liking and foster quality instructor–student relationships. Although instructor offensiveness and indolence may hinder student functional communication in the classroom, instructor incompetence appears to uniquely jeopardize the relational aspect by deterring students from participating in class, making a favorable impression, or building a more intimate instructional relationship, primarily because students consider instructor incompetence to be a source of demotivation (Zhang, 2007). Moreover, these results corroborate the findings obtained by Zhang, as students reported communicating less for all five motives when they perceived their instructor as conveying incompetence.

As in any study, this project has limitations. The primary limitation is the self-report method of data collection. It is possible that student reports of instructor misbehaviors could be influenced by halo effects—that is, students may report an increase in instructor misbehaviors after receiving a bad grade or disliking the subject matter. Observational data of instructor (mis)behavior in the classroom would validate student perceptions. Unfortunately, this study did not use observational data in conjunction with self-report collection. Future research might consider how instructor misbehaviors are communicated online. Given the propensity of students to use e-mail to communicate for functional reasons (Kelly, Duran, & Zolten, 2001), but the tendency for instructors to perceive student e-mails as excuse-making attempts (Duran, Kelly, & Keaten, 2005), instructors may commit misbehaviors online when responding to student e-mail.

Despite these limitations, the results are rather clear. In sum, these findings suggest that teacher misbehaviors do have an impact on how students chose to communicate with an instructor. Although all three misbehaviors disrupt functional instructor–student communication, instructor incompetence appears to affect the relational component that should typically occur in healthy student–instructor dyads. Considering the importance of developing personal relationships with students (Waldeck, 2007), instructors would be sensible not to misuse their power in the classroom and to avoid instructor misbehaviors at all costs.

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