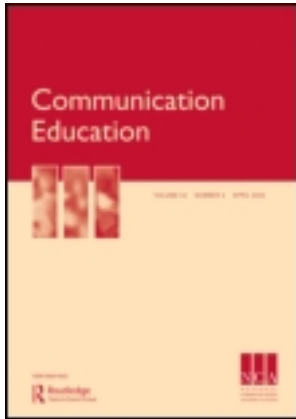


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Brief Report

Instructional Dissent as an Expression of Students' Verbal Aggressiveness and Argumentativeness Traits

Alan K. Goodboy & Scott A. Myers

The purpose of this study was to investigate if college students' verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness traits promote their tendencies to engage in instructional dissent (i.e., expressive, rhetorical, vengeful). Participants were 172 undergraduate students who completed a self-report survey measuring these traits and their dissent practices in reference to a particular class. Results indicated that (a) students' trait verbal aggressiveness was associated positively with communicating rhetorical and vengeful dissent, (b) students' trait argumentativeness was associated positively with communicating rhetorical dissent only, and (c) both verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness were not associated with communicating expressive dissent. These results imply that instructional dissent is not a student reaction completely dependent upon perceived instructor wrongdoings in the classroom; it is also influenced by distal personality factors.

Keywords: Instructional Dissent; Student Dissent; Argumentativeness; Verbal Aggressiveness; Aggressive Communication

Instructional dissent, which occurs when students express their disagreements or complaints about class-related issues (Goodboy, 2011a), is a common student response in college. Indeed, when students feel they are being treated unfairly in the classroom, their most common behavioral response is to dissent, and this response is often directed toward anyone who will listen (Horan, Chory, & Goodboy, 2010), although it is primarily communicated to the class instructor, classmates, friends, and family members (Goodboy, 2011a). Although research on instructional dissent is still in its infancy, preliminary evidence suggests that students blame most of their dissent

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on their instructors, who are perceived to create unfavorable classroom conditions that students dislike. For instance, students cite unfair testing, unfair grading, teaching style, instructor offensiveness, classroom policies, violating the syllabus, instructor indolence, and lack of feedback as primary triggering agents of their own dissent episodes (Goodboy, 2011a). It is likely, however, that these student attributions are somewhat biased. Although students are sometimes legitimately mistreated by instructors (Kearney, Plax, Hays, & Ivey, 1991), it is possible that there are factors beyond instructors' shortcomings that cause students to complain about their coursework.

The purpose of this study was to examine distal factors that are unrelated to students' negative perceptions of their instructors, in an effort to ascertain if some students are inclined to dissent in general, despite bad classroom conditions. To do so, two communication traits were chosen: students' verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness. These traits were chosen for two reasons. First, these traits reflect students' general and stable tendencies to communicate differences of opinion despite the communication context, in this case, the college classroom. Second, these traits have already been linked to the expression of dissent in the organizational context (Kassing & Avtgis, 1999), and may function similarly in the instructional context.

Instructional Dissent

Research on instructional dissent has revealed that students engage in one of three types of dissent over classroom issues: expressive dissent, rhetorical dissent, and vengeful dissent (Goodboy, 2011a). Expressive dissent is an attempt to vent negative feelings in order to feel better and receive sympathy or support over classroom frustrations (e.g., complaining about an instructor who gives boring lectures). Rhetorical dissent involves an attempt to persuade an instructor to correct a perceived wrongdoing in the classroom (e.g., convincing an instructor for a better grade). Vengeful dissent is communicated to ruin an instructor's reputation, dissuade future students from taking an instructor, and enact revenge on the instructor by talking badly about him/her (e.g., trying to get an instructor fired). Goodboy (2011b) discovered that these three types of dissent are related positively to an instructor's use of teacher misbehaviors (i.e., teacher indolence, offensiveness, and incompetence).

Moreover, students report fewer learning outcomes when they engage in dissent. Goodboy (2011b) revealed an inverse relationship between students' expressive and vengeful dissent and their communication satisfaction, motivation, and affective learning. Goodboy also discovered that vengeful dissent was correlated negatively with students' cognitive learning, but interestingly, rhetorical dissent was correlated positively with cognitive learning and was unrelated to the remaining learning outcomes. Therefore, preliminary evidence suggests that rhetorical dissent may not be a detriment to the learning process and may result in a slight increase of learning, assuming that perceived wrongdoings in the classroom are rectified by the instructor. In a second study, Goodboy found that students dissent when they perceive

classroom injustice (i.e., distributive, procedural, interactional), and couple their dissent expression with challenge behavior (i.e., evaluation challenges, procedural challenges, power challenges, practicality challenges).

Unfortunately, the aforementioned research is the only published research on instructional dissent to date. Although teacher misbehaviors and unfairness/injustice in the classroom appear to be the main causes of instructional dissent from both qualitative and quantitative findings (Goodboy, 2011a; 2011b), the complete locus of blame for dissent surely does not rest on the instructor alone. For instance, research on student resistance suggests that students resist instructors' requests by using student-owned strategies, where students accept the blame for their behavior, by engaging in deception, ignoring, priorities, student rebuttal, and hostile defensive communication (Kearney, Plax, & Burroughs, 1991). It is likely, then, that although students may be quick to blame an instructor for their complaints about a course, other factors, such as student factors, account for some of their dissent as well. Two student factors of interest in this study are the communication traits of verbal aggression and argumentativeness.

Verbal Aggressiveness and Argumentativeness

Originally developed by Infante (1987), the construct of aggressive communication consists of four message behaviors (i.e., assertiveness, argumentativeness, hostility, verbal aggressiveness) through which a sender attempts to influence a receiver. In the communication discipline, the argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness message behaviors are the two prominent forms through which this communication has been operationalized and studied (Infante & Rancer, 1996). Verbal aggressiveness is defined as a message behavior that attacks a person's self-concept in order to deliver psychological pain (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Argumentativeness is defined as the predisposition to defend one's position on controversial issues while simultaneously attempting to refute another person's position (Infante & Rancer, 1982).

To date, the bulk of verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness research in the instructional context has examined the impact of perceived instructor argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness in the college classroom (Myers, 2003; Rancer & Avtgis, 2006; Schrodt & Finn, 2010), with a substantial amount of research examining how this perceived communication affects student outcomes. Myers (2002) found that instructors who were perceived as high in argumentativeness, but low in verbal aggressiveness, had students who were highly motivated, evaluated their instructors highly, reported cognitive learning, were highly satisfied, and to a lesser extent, had positive affect toward the course content. These findings echo previous claims made by researchers in that argumentativeness is positively related to, and verbal aggressiveness is negatively related to, student outcomes such as affective learning, state motivation, and satisfaction (Myers & Knox, 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Myers & Rocca, 2000, 2001).

At the same time, scant attention has been paid to the role that students' verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness communication traits play in the classroom.

This is surprising, given that whether and how students communicate with their instructors is a vital part of student–instructor interaction in the classroom (Katt, McCroskey, Sivo, Richmond, & Valencic, 2009; McCroskey, Valencic, & Richmond, 2004). The research conducted to date has found that argumentative students and verbally aggressive students differ in their reasons for why they are motivated to communicate with their instructors. Mansson, Myers, and Martin (2011) reported that argumentative students are motivated to communicate with their instructors for participatory, relational, and sycophantic reasons, whereas verbally aggressive students are motivated to communicate with their instructors for excuse-making and sycophantic reasons. Verbally aggressive students also tend to be male (Kinney, Smith, & Donzella, 2001), at-risk students (Lippert, Titsworth, & Hunt, 2005) who perceive their instructors to be verbally aggressive as well (Schrodt, 2003).

Within the organization, Kassing and Avtgis (1999) found that employees' argumentativeness was related positively to articulated/upward dissent toward superiors, but verbal aggressiveness was related inversely. Instead, employees' verbal aggressiveness was related positively to latent/lateral dissent directed toward coworkers. Due to the parallels that exist between the organization and the classroom (e.g., a clearly established hierarchy and power structure), it is likely, then, that students' verbal aggression functions similarly in the college classroom as it does in the organization. Students who have a tendency to attack individuals' self-concepts should be more likely to complain to an instructor directly (i.e., rhetorical dissent), and more likely to seek revenge by spreading negative publicity about the instructor as a means of a character attack (i.e., vengeful dissent), considering that verbally aggressive individuals have a tendency to attack self-concepts and create psychological pain (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Therefore, we posited the following hypothesis:

H1: Students' trait verbal aggressiveness is associated positively with communicating rhetorical and vengeful dissent.

Students' argumentativeness, though, is likely to operate differently from verbal aggressiveness. While verbal aggressiveness is considered destructive, argumentativeness is considered a constructive trait (Infante, 1995). For instance, research suggests that argumentative individuals are more flexible in their thinking and their communication responses (Martin, Anderson, & Thweatt, 1998). Because Goodboy (2011b) suggested that rhetorical dissent is not an undesirable form of expression and is related positively to cognitive learning, and considering that argumentative students are likely to avoid personal attacks with instructors and focus solely on their arguments, we posited the following hypothesis:

H2: Students' trait argumentativeness is associated positively with communicating rhetorical dissent, but not vengeful dissent.

However, both argumentative and verbally aggressive students have a propensity to approach communication, albeit in constructive versus destructive forms. Therefore, it is unlikely that students would choose to vent their frustrations to third parties for sympathy purposes; rather, these students should prefer more confrontational

communication with or about the instructor directly. Therefore, we posited a final hypothesis:

H3: Students' trait verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness will be unrelated to communicating expressive dissent.

Method

Participants

Participants were 172 undergraduate students (56 men, 116 women) solicited from a convenience sample who were enrolled in a variety of communication courses at a Northeastern university. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 45 years ($M = 19.28$, $SD = 2.64$). Participants reported on 98 male instructors and 70 female instructors (4 unreported). One-third (33.1%) of the sample reported on a course required for their major area of study. A majority of the sample reported on a class size of 30 students or fewer (58.7%); 15.1% reported on a class size of 31–100 students, 11.0% reported on a class size of 101–200 students, and 15.1% of the sample reported on a large lecture of over 200 students.

Procedures and Instrumentation

Participants were asked to complete a series of instruments in addition to providing demographic data. These instruments included the Argumentativeness Scale (Infante & Rancer, 1982), the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (Infante & Wigley, 1986), and the Instructional Dissent Scale (Goodboy, 2011b). Using the methodology advocated by Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, and Richmond (1986), participants completed the instruments in reference to the instructor of the course they attended immediately prior to the research session. After obtaining IRB approval, data were gathered during the last week of the semester so that participants could reflect on their communication throughout the entire semester.

The Argumentativeness Scale is a 20-item instrument that asks respondents to report perceptions of their own argumentative behaviors. Ten items measure a person's tendency to approach argumentative situations (Arg_{ap}), and 10 items measure the tendency to avoid arguments (Arg_{av}). As Infante, Rancer, and Wigley (2011) explained, "Reverse scoring can be used for the avoidance items, and a single score can be obtained for argumentativeness" (p. 147). Responses are solicited using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (*almost always true*) to 1 (*almost never true*). Previous reliability coefficients of .86 (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011) and .89 have been reported (Martin et al., 1998). In this study, a coefficient alpha of .88 ($M = 62.02$, $SD = 12.26$) was obtained for the scale.

The Verbal Aggressiveness Scale is a 20-item instrument that asks respondents to report perceptions of their own verbally aggressive behaviors. Responses are solicited using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (*almost always true*) to 1 (*almost never true*). Previous reliability coefficients of .82 (Lippert et al., 2005) and .88 (Kinney et al., 2001) have been reported. Based on evidence of the bi-dimensionality of this

measure (see Kotowski, Levine, Baker, & Bolt, 2009; Levine et al., 2004; Levine, Kotowski, Beatty, & Van Kelegom, 2012;), only the 10 items reflecting verbal aggressiveness were used, and the 10 reverse-scored items reflecting verbal benevolence were omitted. In this study, a coefficient alpha of .84 ($M = 24.79$, $SD = 6.78$) was obtained for the 10 items.

The Instructional Dissent Scale (IDS) is a 22-item instrument that asks respondents to report on how often they express their disagreements or complaints about class-related issues. This instrument consists of three subscales that measure expressive dissent (10 items), rhetorical dissent (6 items), and vengeful dissent (6 items). Responses are solicited using a five-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Previous reliability coefficients for the subscales have ranged from .83 to .96 (Goodboy, 2011b). In this study, coefficient alphas for the three dissent types ranged from .85 to .92 (expressive: $M = 19.24$, $SD = 11.18$, $\alpha = .95$; rhetorical: $M = 7.61$, $SD = 5.40$, $\alpha = .85$; vengeful: $M = 3.17$, $SD = 5.11$, $\alpha = .92$). Because the IDS is a newer measure, the factor structure was examined using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with maximum likelihood estimation (ML) using LISREL 8.8 (Jöreskog & Sorbom, 2007). Although Goodboy (2011b) previously confirmed the structural validity of the IDS using CFA, he suggested that "Future research should confirm the 3-factor structure of the IDS in subsequent studies" (p. 436). In this study, the results of the CFA indicated that the 3-factor model fit the data reasonably well ($\chi^2(206) = 469.66$, $p < .01$; CFI = .96, SRMR = .079, RMSEA = .087). All 22 items loaded significantly on their respective factors at the $p < .01$ significance level.

Results

Intercorrelations among variables are listed in Table 1. All hypotheses were tested by computing Pearson correlations.

Hypothesis 1 was supported as students' trait verbal aggressiveness was related positively with communicating rhetorical ($r = .21$, $p < .01$) and vengeful dissent ($r = .25$, $p < .01$), accounting for 4% and 6% of the variance respectively. Hypothesis 2 was supported as students' trait argumentativeness was related positively with

Table 1 Reliabilities, Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson Correlations Among Instructional Dissent Types and Verbal Aggressiveness and Argumentativeness Traits

	α	M	SD	1	2	3	4
<i>Communication traits</i>							
1. Verbal Aggressiveness	.84	24.79	6.78	–			
2. Argumentativeness	.88	62.02	12.26	.49 (.57)**	–		
<i>Instructional dissent</i>							
3. Expressive	.95	19.24	11.18	.07 (.08)	–.01 (–.01)	–	
4. Rhetorical	.85	7.61	5.40	.21 (.25)**	.19 (.22)*	.14 (.26)	–
5. Vengeful	.81	3.17	5.11	.25 (.28)**	.10 (.11)	.41 (.44)**	.43 (.49)**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. α = Cronbach's alpha. Correlations in parentheses are corrected for attenuation.

communicating rhetorical dissent ($r = .19$, $p < .05$) accounting for 4% of the variance, but was unrelated to communicating vengeful dissent ($r = .10$, $p = .19$). Hypothesis 3 was supported as the use of expressive dissent was not significantly related to students' trait verbal aggressiveness ($r = .07$, $p = .36$) or argumentativeness ($r = -.01$, $p = .86$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine students' verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness traits as a distal factor to explain students' use of instructional dissent. Three primary findings emerged. The first finding was that students high in either argumentativeness or verbal aggressiveness reported engaging in rhetorical dissent. For these students, engaging in rhetorical dissent may be viewed as the most appropriate type of dissent because it allows them not only to express their displeasure about an instructor's behavior, but also provides them with an opportunity to persuade the instructor to rectify the behavior (Goodboy, 2011a). Of the three types of instructional dissent identified by Goodboy (2011a), rhetorical dissent is the only type that encourages direct interaction between students and their instructors. The locus of attack differs between argumentative and verbal aggressiveness, as argumentative individuals attack an individual's position on a given topic while verbally aggressive individuals can attack both an individual's self-concept and an individual's position on a given topic (Infante, 1988). Students who are high in argumentativeness or verbal aggressiveness, then, may engage in rhetorical dissent because it allows them to directly address the issue or the person that is causing them to experience classroom dissent. Although argumentative and verbally aggressive students may approach the situation differently in terms of their communicative behaviors (Rancer & Avtgis, 2006), both are similarly interested in resolving the dissent situation in a manner that is beneficial to them.

The second finding was that students high in verbal aggressiveness also reported engaging in greater vengeful dissent. Given that indirect interpersonal aggressiveness—which is conceptualized as inflicting harm on an individual without face-to-face interaction (Beatty, Valencic, Rudd, & Dobos, 1999)—is one way in which individuals can behave in a verbally aggressive manner, it makes sense that verbally aggressive students would engage in vengeful dissent because it allows them to retaliate or seek revenge against an instructor without actually having to communicate with the instructor (Goodboy, 2011a). An individual who engages in indirect interpersonal aggressiveness may spread rumors, withhold information, destroy property, and provide inaccurate information to others about another person (Beatty et al., 1999), all of which are behaviors associated with vengeful dissent. Because verbally aggressive individuals believe their use of verbally aggressive messages is justified (Martin, Anderson, & Horvath, 1996) and do not consider these messages to be hurtful (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992), verbally aggressive students who engage in vengeful dissent may share these same characteristics.

The third finding was that expressive dissent was unrelated to students' verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness. This finding is not surprising because students who possess either trait prefer to have more direct and confrontational communication to address disagreement (Rancer, 1998; Wigley, 1998). Expressive dissent, which is directed toward parties outside of the classroom, is a cathartic attempt at expression, not a direct means of communicating disagreement. It is possible that students high in argumentativeness find their venting more appropriate when directed at the instructor in the form of an argument, whereas students high in verbal aggressiveness find a character attack in the form of vengeful dissent to be more satisfying. Students with high argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness tendencies may not seek fulfillment by turning to social support networks for sympathy (i.e., expressive dissent) because their dissent needs are different and require more confrontational communication efforts.

As in any study, this study had limitations. One limitation is that information was not gathered about the classroom climate or the role that students perceive they play in the classroom. Extant research conducted within the organizational setting has found that the type of dissent in which workers engage is linked to their levels of organizational identification, their workplace freedom of speech, and their organizational-based self-esteem (Kassing, 2001; Payne, 2007). For students, it is possible that their classroom participation, their motives for communicating with their instructors, or their general perceptions of the classroom environment affect not only whether they engage in expressive, rhetorical, and vengeful dissent, but also the frequency with which they engage in it and the person(s) to whom they direct it. Furthermore, because dissent can arise at any point during the semester, it might be beneficial to have students report on how and why dissent occurs as it arises as at various points throughout a semester—and how these occurrences affect their classroom involvement—rather than have them consider their overall experience at the end of the semester. Other limitations include the lack of causality from the correlational design, the convenience sample used, and the small correlations that were discovered. Even though Daly and Bippus (1998) noted that the correlations between personality and traits and reported behavior tend to be modest, which is the case in this study, Levine et al. (2012) cautioned about the difference of effects observed for argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness scales on actual observed behavior versus self-reported behavior. Their findings revealed that these scales revealed larger effects for self-reported behavior only. This current study measured student self-reports of dissent behavior, yielding modest to weak correlations that are consistent with Levine et al.'s meta-analytic findings. Therefore, research that examines observable student behavior in the classroom instead of self-reported behavior may yield different effect sizes, if any effects at all.

Future research should continue to examine distal and proximal factors that influence student dissent beyond instructor behaviors in the classroom. Although recent research suggests that a majority of instructional dissent is the result of perceived problems in the classroom (Goodboy, 2011a, 2011b), it is possible that some students dissent in general, despite the instructor or

classroom conditions. Future research should examine students' educational orientations and beliefs about school, as well as students' general communication patterns and norms. It is likely that students' experiences throughout their entire span of schooling may generate beliefs and behaviors related to their college classroom experiences. It is also possible that students' communication patterns spanning from childhood to adolescence, which are influenced by their socialization experiences from parents and peers, transfer over into the classroom as young adults. Student dissent and complaining may be a function of both proximal influences in the classroom and learned educational and familial norms while growing up. Future research should continue to uncover the causes and consequences of instructional dissent.

The findings from this study at least suggest that not all student dissent can be explained by students' disliking of classroom instruction. Instructors would be wise to view instructional dissent as a potential marker for classroom problems, but instructors should also keep in mind that some students, especially those high in argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness, may dissent in any class because of their stable dispositions to use aggressive communication. It is possible, then, that even effective instructors may receive dissent from these students.

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