

Advisor–Advisee Communication Two: The Influence of Verbal Aggression and Humor Assessment on Advisee Perceptions of Advisor Credibility and Affective Learning

Jason S. Wrench & Narissra M. Punyanunt-Carter

The goal of the current study was to further the research line initiated by the authors that examined the influence of a variety of communication variables in the Graduate Advisor–Advisee interpersonal relationship. The current study examined the relationship between advisee perceptions of advisor verbal aggression and humor assessment and the impact these variables have on advisee affect and advisee perceptions of advisor credibility (competence, caring/goodwill, and trustworthiness). Findings revealed that advisor humor assessment was positively related to both advisee affect and advisee perceptions of advisor credibility. The study further found that advisor verbal aggression was negatively related to both advisee affect and advisee perceptions of advisor credibility.

Keywords: Instructional Communication; Humor; Credibility; Verbal Aggression; Advisor-Advisee Relationships

Advisors are often viewed as mentors for graduate students. Mentoring can be described as the communication relationship where a senior person advises, teaches, and encourages a junior person's professional and sometimes personal development (Hill, Bahniuk, & Dobos, 1989; Kalbfleisch, 1997). These relationships have been recognized as important predictors to the junior person and/or student's success in

Jason S. Wrench (EdD, West Virginia, 2002) is an assistant professor in the department of communication studies at Ohio University—Eastern Campus. Narissra Maria Punyanunt-Carter (PhD, Kent State University, 2002) is an assistant professor in the department of communication at Texas Tech University. Correspondence should be addressed to the first author at Ohio University-Eastern, School of Communication Studies, 42425 National Road, St. Clairsville, OH 43950, USA (Email: JasonSWrench@aol.com). This paper was presented at the 2004 National Communication Association Convention in Chicago, Illinois.

future endeavors (Hill et al., 1989). This relationship is equally important for the mentor's career success. As Hall and Sandler (1983) noted that academia usually operates mainly through a collegial system and the standard for the discipline are passed down from a senior person to a junior person. Hence, the senior faculty members tend to be leaders and gatekeepers for the junior faculty. To have a successful advisor–advisee relationship, both parties must communicate effectively (Hill et al., 1989).

In Advisor–Advisee One (Wrench & Punyanunt, 2004), it was found that the extent to which advisees feel they are being mentored was positively related to advisee perceptions of the advisor's communication competence and perceived credibility. Advisee–Advisor One also found that advisor immediacy was positively related to advisee perceptions of advisor competence, caring/goodwill, trustworthiness, and communication competence. Finally, the first study in this series reported that advisees perceive that they cognitively learn more and have more effective advisor–advisee relationships with more immediate advisors. Overall, these results are in synch with previous literature because it was suspected that the advisor–advisee relationship would be similar to the dynamics seen in previous immediacy studies that examined teachers and students in the traditional classroom setting (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999).

Research examining the instructional process has found a number of interpersonal communication variables that positively relate to a student's overall classroom and learning experience (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Yet, Kalbfleisch and Davies (1993) noted that the influence of interpersonal variables in the mentoring relationship has been neglected in the communication studies literature. Moreover, they discovered that communication behaviors can impact protégés from mentor involvement. The purpose of the current study is to further our understanding of advisor–advisee communication by examining variables that have been shown to negatively (i.e., verbal aggression) and positively (i.e., interpersonal humor) affect two variables related to the classroom environment (affective learning and advisor credibility).

Verbal Aggression

Verbal aggression has been commonly defined as message behavior that attacks a person's self-concept in order to deliver psychological pain (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Statements that purposefully are used to hurt another person are considered verbally aggressive. Rocca and McCroskey (1999) found that verbal aggressiveness was negatively related to immediacy and attractiveness. Martin, Weber, and Burant (1997) found a negative relationship between instructor verbal aggressiveness and student perceptions of instructors' competence. Moreover, verbal aggressiveness has been linked to lower levels of student state motivation (Myers & Rocca, 2001). All in all, unlike humor assessment, which has been shown to have positive effects, verbal aggressiveness has been shown to have negative consequences in the instructional setting.

Humor Assessment

The Humor Assessment (HA) instrument was originally published by Richmond, Wrench, and Gorham (2001) as a self-report measure for teachers in a communication education textbook. The researchers originally took out the references to joke telling and story telling because they saw the limitations of the Humor Orientation (HO) scale created by M. Booth-Butterfield and S. Booth-Butterfield (1991). The HA was designed to be a more generalized scale that does not restrict humor to joke and storytelling, but asks about an individual's overall use of humor as a communicative tool.

Wrench and Richmond (2004) found that a teacher's level of humor as a tool in a classroom was positively related to student perceptions of that teacher's nonverbal immediacy and credibility. The study further found that a teacher's humor assessment was positively related to student affect in the classroom and student cognitive learning in the classroom environment. Moreover, Aylor and Opllinger (2003) found that college students' perceptions of their instructor's humor orientation were positively related to the increased amount of out-of-class communication (OCC). In addition, instructor's humor orientation was positively related to students' satisfaction with OCC. Their study illustrated how instructors' humor orientation can positively affect students' perceptions about communication with their instructor. Hence, a teacher's use of humor as an interpersonal variable in the classroom impacts how students react in and out of the classroom.

Student Affect

Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl (1965) purport that there are three primary domains in which learning occurs: affective, behavioral, and cognitive. According to McCroskey (1998), affective learning is a combination of a student's attitude towards the (1) instructor of a course (teacher evaluation), (2) content of the course (affective learning), along with measures of higher order levels of student affect, (3) the desire to take additional classes in the subject matter, and (4) the taking of additional classes with a teacher. Dimensions two and three are in congruence with Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia's (1956) conceptualization of the affective domain in learning. In fact, McCroskey (1998) argues along with Bloom, Cruikshank, and Wittrock (2000) that affective learning is the most important aspect of learning in the classroom. Without affect, cognitive and behavioral learning will not easily occur (Richmond, Wrench, & Gorham, 2001). Previous research examining teacher–student relationships found a positive relationship between teacher humor assessments and student levels of affect in the college classroom (Wrench & Richmond, 2004). Additionally, Wrench and Richmond (2004) found a negative relationship between teacher verbal aggression and student levels of affect in the college classroom. Based on these two studies, we offer the following two hypotheses:

H1: Graduate advisor verbal aggression will negatively relate to advisee affect.

H2: Graduate advisor humor will positively relate to advisee affect.

Source Credibility

Credibility or ethos was originally a construct that was advanced by Aristotle based on the early thinking of Corax and Tisius. Aristotle saw credibility consisting of three primary factors: competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Competence is the extent that an individual truly knows what he or she is discussing. The second component of credibility is trustworthiness, which is the degree to which one individual perceives another person as being honest. The final component of credibility, goodwill, is the perceived caring that a receiver sees in a source. Out of all of these, goodwill may be the most important aspect of ethos (McCroskey, 1998). Most of the research completed studying credibility outside of traditional public speaking research has been in classroom settings examining teacher credibility (McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Toale, 2001; Wrench & Richmond, 2004). In a study by Wrench and Booth-Butterfield (2003), they found that a physician's use of humor with her or his patients was positively correlated to all three factors of McCroskey and Teven's (1999) credibility construct. Furthermore, Wrench and Richmond (2000) found that teacher verbal aggression was negatively related to student perceptions of instructor credibility. Based on these two studies, we offer the following two hypotheses:

H3: Graduate advisor verbal aggression will negatively relate to advisee perceptions of source credibility (competence, trustworthiness, and caring/goodwill).

H4: Graduate advisor humor will positively relate to advisee perceptions of source credibility (competence, trustworthiness, and caring/goodwill).

Methods*Participants*

Participants were graduate students from around the nation gathered through electronic means. Specifically, a number of Internet sites and Listservs that have graduate student participants were targeted (e.g., CRTNET, ICA-Net*). When students linked to the website, they were given an initial letter discussing the use of human subjects, and were then prompted to proceed to the actual survey. In this study we collected information on five primary demographic variables: biological sex, age, ethnicity, year in school, and major discipline. The sample consisted of 84 (54.9%) females, 66 (43.1%) males, and 3 (2%) non-responding for a total of 153 participants. The mean age of the sample was $M = 32.49$. The ethnic breakdown of the sample consisted of 6 African-Americans (4%), 97 Anglo/Caucasians (64.2%), 11 Middle Easterners (7.3%), 9 Asians (6%), 5 Hispanic/Latinos (3.3%), 0 Native Americans, 6 Indians (4%), 8 who classified themselves as "other" (5.3%), and 9 who did not answer this question (6%). The sample consisted of 9 (5.9%) first year masters students in a two year program, 4 (2.6%) first year masters students in a one year program, 24 (15.7%) second year masters students in a two year program, 21 (13.7%) first year doctoral students, 22 (14.4%) second year doctoral students, 18

(11.8%) third year doctoral students, 6 (3.9%) fourth year doctoral students, 40 (26.1%) all but dissertation, and 7 (4.6%) of the participants had completed their degrees within the last year and still were able to recall their relationship with their advisors. Participants from a variety of academic fields participated in this study: 10 (6.5%) arts, 16 (10.5%) business, 37 (24.2%) communication, 4 (2.6%) education, 6 (3.9%) English, 14 (9.2%) engineering, 4 (2.6%) physical sciences, 33 (21.6%) social sciences, and 23 (15%) other academic areas with six participants not responding to the question. Overall, our population was quite diverse, which allowed for a greater understanding of the advisor–advisee communication process.

Measures

Verbal aggressiveness scale

The verbal aggressiveness scale was created by Infante and Wigley (1986) as a way to measure trait verbal aggression. The verbal aggressiveness scale contains 20 five-point scale Likert-type items ranging from “almost never true” to “almost always true.” This study employed the 10-item shortened version of the verbal aggressiveness scale. Scores on the revised version of the verbal aggressiveness scale can range from 10 to 50, which was seen in this study. The verbal aggressiveness scale had an alpha reliability of 0.89 ($M = 18.00$; $SD = 6.58$), which is consistent with previous results.

Humor assessment

The humor assessment instrument (HA) instrument is a 16-item, self-report measure that uses a five-point Likert format ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The HA was developed to measure an individual’s use of humor in interpersonal communication contexts by Wrench and Richmond (2000). Scores for the HA can range from 16 to 80. In this sample, the range was from 24 to 80. The RHA had an alpha reliability of 0.96 ($M = 57.09$; $SD = 12.97$).

Student affective learning

The student affective learning instrument was designed by McCroskey (1998) to mimic the objectives of the affective domain of learning originally discussed by Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1956). The measure examines the level of affect a student has for the course, subject matter, teacher, recommended behaviors, the desire for further courses in the area, and actually taking courses in the subject area. Each aspect of affective learning is measured by four 7-item bi-polar scales. We also used the portion of the student affective learning instrument that could examine graduate advisee levels of affect toward their advisors and the degree to which they believed they would engage in the behaviors recommended by their advisor. Scores for these two sections of the student affective learning evaluation can range from 8 to 56. This study had scores ranging from 10 to 56. The alpha reliability score for this measure was 0.86 ($M = 40.79$; $SD = 6.58$).

Credibility measurement

To assess credibility, the 18-item McCroskey and Teven (1999) scale was used. Item measures were bi-polar with a range from one to seven. Scores for all subcategories can range from 6 to 42. The alpha reliability for competence in this study was 0.83 ($M = 36.33$; $SD = 6.52$); for trustworthiness, 0.91 ($M = 35.28$; $SD = 7.95$); and for caring/goodwill, 0.92 ($M = 31.46$; $SD = 8.88$).

Results

To analyze the hypotheses in this study, we first ran a series of Pearson product moment correlations to examine the predicted relationships. The entire correlation matrix can be seen in Table 1. The first hypothesis predicted a negative relationship between advisor verbal aggression and advisee affect, which was found in this study, $r(151) = -0.39$, $p < 0.0001$. The second hypothesis predicted that an advisee's perception of her or his advisor's humor assessment would positively relate to advisee affect, which was found in this study, $r(151) = 0.25$, $p < 0.0001$. The third hypothesis predicted that advisor verbal aggression would relate negatively to all three factors of credibility, which was found in this study: competence, $r(151) = -0.40$, $p < 0.0001$; caring/goodwill, $r(151) = -0.61$, $p < 0.0001$; and trustworthiness, $r(151) = -0.66$, $p < 0.0001$. The fourth, and final hypothesis, predicted that that an advisee's perception of her or his advisor's humor assessment would positively relate to all three factors of credibility, which was found in this study: competence, $r(151) = 0.31$, $p < 0.0001$; caring/goodwill, $r(151) = 0.45$, $p < 0.0001$; and trustworthiness, $r(151) = 0.36$, $p < 0.0001$.

As a follow up to the initial hypotheses, a canonical correlation was conducted using advisor verbal aggression and humor assessment as the independent variables and affect and credibility as the dependent variables. Using Wilks' Λ , the overall model was significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.47$, $F(8, 290) = 16.54$, $p < 0.0001$, which indicates that the two variates are significantly associated by the canonical correlation. Both canonical correlations were found to be significant in this study: Canonical Correlation 1, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.47$, $F(8, 290) = 16.54$, $p < 0.0001$; and Canonical

Table 1 Correlation Matrix

	Verbal aggression	Humor assessment	Advisee affect	Competence	Caring/goodwill
Verbal aggression					
Humor assessment	-0.40				
Advisee affect	-0.39	0.25			
Competence	-0.40	0.31	0.51		
Caring/goodwill	-0.61	0.45	0.49	0.56	
Trustworthiness	-0.66	0.36	0.47	0.69	0.78

All correlations were significant at $p < 0.0001$

Table 2 Canonical Correlation

	Variate One	Variate Two
Independent variables		
Verbal aggression	0.98	0.21
Humor assessment	−0.58	0.81
Dependent variables		
Advisee affect	−0.56	0.08
Competence	−0.60	0.30
Caring/Goodwill	−0.92	0.37
Trustworthiness	−0.95	−0.17

Correlation 2, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.94$, $F(3, 146) = 0.319$, $p < 0.05$. The first variate accounted for approximately 47.8% of the variance in the dependent variable (canonical correlation = 0.46), and the second variate accounted for approximately 20.9% of the variance in the dependent variable (canonical correlation = 0.19). The exact canonical loadings for each variable can be seen in Table 2.

Discussion

The results reported in this study related to verbal aggression and humor orientation support previous literature on the nature of these variables in the applied classroom setting. Our first and third hypotheses examined the effects of verbal aggression on the perceptions of graduate advisor–advisee relationships. The first hypothesis looked at verbal aggressiveness and advisee affect. Results indicated that verbal aggressiveness was negatively related to advisee affect. This is similar to the finding by Wrench and Richmond (2000) between teacher aggressiveness and affect. Previous research has also shown that homophily and attraction, which are positively related to student affect (Richmond, Wrench, & Gorham, 2001), are negatively related to verbal aggression (Rocca & McCroskey, 1999). These findings further demonstrate the negative influence that verbal aggression has on the learning environment.

Our third hypothesis looked at verbal aggressiveness and source credibility. Our results indicated that there was a negative relationship between verbal aggressiveness and source credibility, which is similar to Cole and McCroskey's (2003) study, which found a negative relationship between supervisor verbal aggression and subordinate perceptions of supervisor credibility. This study helps to reconfirm the negative value of verbal aggression on perceptions of source credibility.

The canonical correlation analysis further illustrated the negative relationships between verbal aggression and all of the study variables. All of the study variables loaded on the first variate above the 0.3 cutoff generally deemed necessary for determining meaningful relationships in a canonical correlation (Tabachnik & Fidel, 2001). Overall, this analysis clearly illustrates that verbal aggression negatively impacts a number of positive instructional communication variables, so limiting advisor verbal aggression is really necessary to improve the quality of the advisor–advisee relationship.

Our second and fourth hypotheses examined the effects of humor on the perceptions of graduate advisor–advisee relationships. The second hypothesis looked at humor and student affect. Results indicated that a positive relationship between humor and student affect, which mirrors the results of the Wrench and Richmond (2000) study that examined the affect of teacher humor assessment on student affect. The fourth hypothesis found that there is a slight relationship between humor and source credibility, which is similar to the Wrench and Booth-Butterfield (2003) that found that physician humor positively affected patients’ perceptions of physician credibility. All and all, humor has an influence, however, the magnitude of this influence and advisor–advisee relationships is not that large considering the amount of variance actually accounted for. In other words, an advisors’ humor assessment does impact advisee affect and perceptions of advisors’ credibility, but it is clearly not the most important or only variable that needs to be examined in the realm of advisee affect and perceptions of advisors’ credibility.

While the simple Pearson product moment correlations did support our initial hypothesis, the actual relationship of humor with the other study variables is somewhat less dramatic. According to the canonical correlation, humor loaded primarily on the second variate, and only two other variables loaded above 0.3 on the second variate (competence and caring/goodwill). Based on this result, it would appear that a clear relationship does not exist between an advisor’s humor assessment and advisee affect or advisee perceptions of advisor trustworthiness or verbal aggression. McCroskey (1998) argued that caring/goodwill are the most important aspect of credibility. Because there is a positive relationship between caring/goodwill and affect and trustworthiness and a negative relationship with verbal aggression, it is possible that the positive correlational results found in this study are indications of caring/goodwill’s influence and the variables themselves account for no unique variance. As for the relation of competence on this variate, Wrench and Punyanunt (2004) indicated that in advisor–advisee relationships caring/goodwill and competence were the two most important categories of credibility. In essence, advisees want advisors who know their content area and care about the advisee, as for the actual ethical nature of the advisor, that’s somewhat more optional. The finding that advisor humor assessment in this study primarily loads with caring/goodwill and competence is a further indication that these two factors of credibility are seen by advisors as being the most prosocial. This finding also suggests that for advisors, using humor in the advising relationship is a way to increase advisee perceptions of credibility, which as Wrench and Punyanunt (2004) demonstrated leads to stronger mentoring relationships and increased advisee learning.

Limitations

There are a few limitations that must be discussed in this current study. First, the method we used in this study to request research participants were not random and could influence the results we have in this study. Second, the study was limited in the

overall sample size that was collected. While the sample only consists of 153 participants, the overall data points per predictor variables examined in this study is within reason. According to Stevens (2001), when using multiple regression analyses it is best to have at least 15 data points per predictor variable in a regression equation, which this study had. Third, the measures used in this study were another limitation. As we stated earlier, the measures used in this study have been used in instructional contexts other than graduate schools. There are differences in the type of mentoring and selection process of mentors in the various contexts where mentoring has been studied. Advising and graduate student mentoring activities can range from selecting a course of study, preparing a graduate thesis or dissertation, collaborating on research, to preparing graduate students to teach specific specializations. In other words, the graduate mentoring relationship is dynamic and can include or not include a number of characteristics not present in other traditional student–teacher relationships.

Future Research

The studies produced in this new series of research have led to a variety of interesting questions about the similarities and differences between traditional teacher–student relationships and advisor–advisee relationships. For this reason, we provide the following possible lines of new research in this area. First, as of this point, we have limited our exploration about advisor–advisee communication to the context of graduate advisor–advisee relationships, future research may want to compare graduate advisor–advisee relationships to undergraduate advisor–advisee relationships. On many university campuses, strong mentoring relationships exist on both the undergraduate and graduate levels, but this is not the case everywhere. Furthermore, undergraduate advisor–advisee relationships could be very important for developing interest and desire to continue education past the baccalaureate, so for the health of the field this line of research could be very important.

Clearly the studies in the advisor–advisee communication series have only selected to examine a handful of instructional and interpersonal communication variables that the current authors find interesting, so there is a wide variety of other variables that could be explored in future research. While we are not suggesting that every instructional communication article ever examined between teachers and students be replicated using advisors and advisees, we are suggesting that there are many replication studies that could prove themselves very interesting for understanding the advisor–advisee relationship.

Conclusion

This investigation furthers a research program that examines advisor–advisee communicative relationships. Results from this study indicated the negative impact of verbal aggression in the advisor–advisee relationship on perceptions on student

affect and source credibility. Moreover, results indicated the positive influence of humor in the advisor–advisee relationship on perceptions on student affect and source credibility.

While this study and Wrench and Punyanunt (2004) Advisor–Advisee One have initiated this unique line of research, clearly, this is an untapped and needed line of communication research that should be further researched. Future possible avenues of research should include areas such as organizational identification and assimilation, conflict-management, further interpersonal communication variables, further instructional communication variables, and other variables that could possibly impact the effectiveness of the advisor–advisee relationship.

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