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Students' Early Impressions of Instructors: Understanding the Role of Relational Skills and Messages

Sean M. Horan, Marian L. Houser, Alan K. Goodboy, & Ann Bainbridge Frymier

Research suggests that initial impressions are important and set the tone for future interactions; however, little is known about which teacher communication behaviors create positive initial judgments by students. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among a set of teacher relational communication behaviors and students' early judgments about the future outcomes of the course. Specifically, students reported perceptions of their instructors' use of power, confirmation, nonverbal immediacy, and communication skills in the beginning of a semester and their predictions about future interactions with that instructor. Results indicated that teachers' use of coercive and legitimate power were negatively related to students' predicted outcome value (POV) judgments, whereas the use of reward, referent, and expert power, along with confirmation and communication skills, were positively correlated with students' POV judgments. Hierarchical regression further revealed unique relational message predictors of these judgments.

Keywords: Confirmation; Conversational Skills; Power; Predicted Outcome Value Theory

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Teachers often want to make a good first impression because they believe this impression will set the tone for the semester. Research on thin-slicing, or a "brief excerpt of expressive behavior sampled from the behavioral stream" (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000, p. 203), supports this notion, indicating that students form rapid assessments of teachers (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993; Babad, 2005; Babad, Bernieri, & Rosenthal, 1989, 1991). It is interesting to note that in most studies of thin-slicing, students were only exposed to video clips ranging from 10 to 30 sec. Despite the clips' brevity, students generated thin-slice judgments solely based on instructor communication, and these judgments were consistent with end-of-semester evaluations (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). Clearly, initial interactions with instructors and student first impressions count in the classroom.

Purpose of Study

The teacher–student relationship has been described as an interpersonal relationship (e.g., Frymier & Houser, 2000), which implies that it develops over time and is impacted by communication. Consequently, students' initial impressions should influence how they communicate and respond later in the semester and the relational components of teacher messages, expressed early in the semester, should enhance students' early impressions of instructors. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to examine how perceived relational skills and relational messages expressed during early teacher–student interactions relate to student impressions of the teacher-student relationship. Given the focus on initial impressions formulated during initial interactions, Predicted Outcome Value (POV) Theory was adopted (Sunnafrank, 1986) in this study. Instructors have various relational communication skills, which are manifested through communication; thus perceived communication skills (Frymier & Houser, 2000), along with messages conveying power use (see Roach, Richmond, & Mottet, 2006), confirmation (Ellis, 2000), and nonverbal immediacy (NVI; see Richmond, Lane, & McCroskey, 2006) were examined. These were selected because they contain relational components and influence students. Prior work has focused primarily on students' perceptions measured well into a current academic term, posing the question of whether these behaviors are initially salient to students. Before fully exploring this question, it is first necessary to understand POV Theory.

Predicted Outcome Value Theory

POV Theory (Sunnafrank, 1986) argues that POV judgments are key predictors of relational development; that is, POV maintains that individuals generate positive or negative judgments during initial interactions that will, in turn, either encourage or hinder relational development. Supporting the theory, POV judgments have been associated with nonverbal expressiveness, information seeking, and the amount of future communication in which individuals engage (Grove & Werkman, 1991; Horan et al., 2009; Mottet, 2000; Sunnafrank, 1988; Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). Initial messages, such as immediacy and messages that enhance perceptions of attraction,

are key predictors of POV judgments (Houser, Horan, & Furler, 2008), whereas learning of a target's homosexuality (Mottet, 2000) or HIV+ status (Horan et al., 2009) diminishes POV judgments. Because communication during initial interactions impacts POV judgments, we sought to understand how specific instructor relational skills and messages relate to students' judgments. Although POV judgments have not been widely studied in the classroom, Bippus, Kearney, Plax, and Brooks (2003) did find that students reported higher POV judgments of extra class communication (e.g., ''informal faculty–study interaction that occurs beyond the realm of formal in-class instruction''; Bippus, Brooks, Plax, & Kearney, 2001, p. 16) when they perceived their teachers to be both physically and socially accessible as well as good mentors, compared to those who they perceived as less accessible and poorer mentors.

It is our contention that examining student perceptions of instructor communication during the first month of a semester constitutes the initial interactions on which students' base their predictions. This is partially based on a recent organizational POV study, where Madlock and Horan (2009) examined the perceptions of employees during their first month at a new organization, utilizing a 30-day cap as ''initial interactions'' within an organization. Likewise, this study captures student perceptions of instructor communication during their first month of a semester. The longer period of time for identifying ''initial interactions'' is due to the fact that students generally attend classes only two to three times per week.

Teacher Relational Skills and Messages

This study examined interpersonal communication skills along with messages of confirmation, power, and nonverbal immediacy (NVI) in relation to students' early impressions of instructor relational skills and messages.

Communication skills. Burleson and Samter (1990) measured the importance of eight different skills in platonic friendships: conversational skill, referential skill, ego support, comforting, conflict management, persuasive skill, narrative skill, and regulation skill. In a study investigating how important students perceived these skills to be in the student–teacher relationship, Frymier and Houser (2000) found that students rated referential and ego support skills to be the most important for instructors to possess; these abilities were also the ones most strongly associated with student learning and motivation. Frymier and Houser's research thus indicates that instructors' communication skills are important to students.

Teacher confirmation. Teacher confirmation is the ''process by which teachers communicate to students that they are endorsed, recognized, and acknowledged as valuable'' (Ellis, 2000, p. 266). Confirmation is multidimensional, based on perceptions that instructors engage in an interactive teaching style, respond to students' questions, and demonstrate interest in students' learning. Confirming teachers are perceived as understanding, credible, and more likely to use prosocial (versus antisocial) forms of power (Schrodt, Turman, & Soliz, 2006; Turman & Schrodt, 2006). Further, Goodboy and Myers (2008) found that while teacher confirmation

resulted in increases in student learning, satisfaction, participation, and state motivation, it also resulted in decreases in challenge behavior. These researchers also observed that students reported communicating less for excuse making motives and more for functional, relational, and participatory motives when they perceived their instructor to be confirming. Buber (1957) proposed that confirmation was the most important aspect of human communication, and the reviewed research indicates that confirmation is an important relational message. The importance of this message, then, could potentially be a factor in forming initial relational perceptions.

Power use. Power is both a rhetorical and relational phenomenon (Roach et al., 2006) based on student perceptions (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984). There are five ways which teachers can use power: *coercive power* is granted when students perceive their instructors can disallow rewards or implement punishments, *legitimate power* is granted when students perceive the role of instructor merits power, *referent power* is granted when students perceive an instructor is likeable, *reward power* is granted when students perceive an instructor can remove punishments or assign rewards, and *expert power* is granted when students perceive their instructor possesses abilities and knowledge (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983). Perceived prosocial power use is positively related to affective learning (Richmond, 1990; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984), confirmation (Turman & Schrodt, 2006), and classroom justice concerns (Horan & Myers, 2009; Paulsel, Chory-Assad, & Dunleavy, 2005), whereas antisocial power use is negatively related to affective learning (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984). Given that power contains a large relational dimension (Roach et al., 2006), it is likely that initial power messages (prosocial vs. antisocial) are a factor in early impressions.

Nonverbal immediacy. Immediacy, a perception of closeness (Mehrabian, 1971; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroksey, 1987), is communicated through a variety of nonverbal behaviors and is positively related to learning and motivation (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1994; Frymier & Houser, 2000). NVI behaviors such as smiling, making eye contact, and moving about the classroom are key components of messages that people use to define their relationships (Burgoon & Le Poire, 1999). NVI communicates liking and the sender's desire to approach; this would logically result in the recipient's forming positive predictions about potential relational outcomes. Consistent with this reasoning, Sunnafrank (1988) reported that nonverbal affiliative expressiveness was associated with positive predicted outcomes, a finding replicated 20 years later by Houser et al. (2008). Thus, when teachers engage in NVI, students should be more likely to formulate positive POV judgments.

Hypothesis and Research Question

POV contends that individuals forecast relational outcomes based on initial interactions (Sunnafrank, 1986). This study extends prior classroom POV research (Bippus et al., 2003) by examining how the aforementioned relational skills and messages expressed during early interactions relate to students' POV judgments.

We predict that instructors' use of communication skills, confirmation, prosocial power, and NVI will relate to POV judgments. These relational skills and messages

communicate that teachers care about students, are engaged in the classroom, and are willing to help students learn. Therefore, when teachers engage in such positive relational behaviors, students should be more likely to make predictions that the teacher—and the class—will be a positive experience and worth their time and effort. Formally, the hypothesis predicts the following:

> *H1: Communication skills, confirmation, prosocial power use, and NVI will be positively related to POV judgments whereas antisocial power use will be negatively related to POV judgments.*

Although we expect that instructor communication will be related to POV judgments, not all of these behaviors may operate similarly. Given that eight communication skills, three confirmation dimensions, five bases of power, and NVI were measured, it is likely these behaviors are related, but not isomorphic, and each may account for unique variance in judgments. To explore this possibly, the following research question is proposed:

> *RQ1: To what extent do teacher relational messages (communication skills, NVI, confirmation, and power use) uniquely predict students' POV judgments?*

Method

Participants and Measurement

Participants ($N = 157$; $n = 71$ from a large Southern and $n = 110$ from a midsized Eastern university) were recruited to complete a survey. Ages ranged from 18 to 45 years ($M = 20.51$, $SD = 2.55$; 105 women). Most participants reported on classes with 30 students or less ($n = 85$), 42 reported on a class from 31 to 100 students, and 30 reported on a class with 101+ students.[1]

POV judgments. Using students in a variety of small classes, POV judgments were measured at the beginning of a new semester with a cutoff time of four weeks—that is, data collection was terminated after the fourth week of a semester. Mottet's (2000) POV measure was employed. Student participants were asked to base all responses on the instructor they had directly before their current class (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986). The scale contains 7-point semantic differential items (e.g., Respondents were asked to describe the value of future interaction with the target using the following bipolar adjective pairs: positive–negative, good–bad, satisfying–unsatisfying, not valuable–valuable, worthwhile–not worthwhile, rewarding–unrewarding, and comfortable–uncomfortable). Respondents were asked to predict the outcome value of future interaction with their instructors. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics and reliabilities for all measurement instruments. Although some may question the ability of students to generate assessments of relationships and instructors' behaviors with less than 1 month of classroom experience, prior experimental research indicates that students generate rapid and reliable assessments based on thin-slices ranging from 10 sec to 5 min of communication (e.g., Babad et al., 1991).

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities for Scales

Variable	*M*	*SD*	α
Predicted outcome value judgments	5.25	1.22	0.90
Conversational skill	4.56	1.65	0.91
Referential skill	5.13	1.44	0.92
Ego-supportive skill	4.52	1.76	0.95
Comforting skill	3.00	1.72	0.94
Conflict management skill	4.40	1.37	0.86
Persuasive skill	3.60	1.64	0.86
Narrative skill	3.99	1.78	0.92
Regulation skill	4.08	1.68	0.92
Demonstrates interest	6.60	3.26	0.83
Teaching style	5.2	2.82	0.85
Responds to questions	5.67	2.65	0.86
Expert power	5.41	1.24	0.86
Referent power	4.40	1.24	0.89
Legitimate power	3.52	1.07	0.67
Coercive power	2.37	1.13	0.82
Reward power	3.98	1.26	0.81
Nonverbal immediacy	4.61	1.62	0.82

Communication skills. Communication skills were measured using a modified version of Burleson and Samter's (1990) Communication Functions Questionnaire. Students were asked to report the extent to which their teachers engaged in behaviors reflecting each of the skills; response options ranged from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). Sample items include, "Can make conversation seem effortless," and "Has the ability to express ideas in a clear, concise way."

Confirmation. Confirmation was assessed via the Teacher Confirmation Scale (Ellis, 2000). This scale is composed of 16 Likert-type items that ask participants to rate teachers' confirming behaviors across three dimensions: demonstrates interest (e.g., communicates that he or she is interested in whether students are learning), teaching style (e.g., uses an interactive teaching style), and responds to questions (e.g., takes time to answer students' questions fully). Responses range from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

Power. Teacher power use was measured using Schrodt, Witt, and Turman's (2007) Instructor Power Use measure. Respondents were asked to rate teacher behaviors reflecting power on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). Sample items include, "My teacher glares at students who misbehave," and "My teacher publicly recognizes students who exceed expectations in course performance."

Immediacy. NVI was measured using Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney, and Plax's (1987) 14-item NVI scale. Respondents rate immediacy behaviors using a Likert-type

scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Sample items included, ''Smiles at the class while talking,'' and ''Looks at the class while talking.''

Results

H1 predicted that students' POV judgments would be positively related to communication skills, prosocial power use, confirmation, NVI, and negatively related to antisocial power use. Pearson correlations supported this hypothesis. For example, POV judgments were positively related to prosocial power use and negatively related to antisocial power use. See Table 2 for a complete list of all correlation values and directions.

RQ1 explored the extent to which teacher relational skills and messages uniquely predicted POV judgments after controlling for variance explained by the aforementioned variables. Considering virtually all of the prosocial messages examined in this study were positively correlated with one another and, further, that NVI is already known to predict POV judgments (Houser et al., 2008), a hierarchal multiple regression was computed to detect the unique effects of these predictor variables. NVI was entered first so that the unique variance contributed by the other variables could be discovered, the three confirmation subscales were entered as the second block because of their strong correlation with immediacy (e.g., Ellis, 2000), communication skills were entered as the third block because of their importance identified in past research (Frymier & Houser, 2000), and power as the final block entered last because it was the only variable with components predicted to negatively impact POV.

Overall, a significant model was obtained which accounted for 64% of the variance in POV judgments, $F(17, 134) = 13.89$, $p < .001$ ($R^2 = .64$). In the first block ($R^2 = .32$), NVI was a significant predictor of POV judgments ($\beta = .56$; $t = 8.32$, $p < .001$). In the second block ($\Delta R^2 = .12$), NVI remained a significant predictor ($\beta = .35$; $t = 4.40$, $p < .001$), along with the teacher confirmation dimensions of responding to questions ($\beta = .20$; $t = 2.28$, $p < .05$) and teaching style ($\beta = .22$; $t = 2.03$, $p < .05$). In the third block ($\Delta R^2 = .09$), only the persuasive ($\beta = -.22$; $t = -2.16$, $p < .05$), referential ($\beta = .30$; $t = 2.75$, $p < .01$), and regulatory ($\beta = .25$; $t = 2.26$, $p < .05$) skills remained significant predictors. In the fourth block ($\Delta R^2 = .11$), only referent ($\beta = .40$; $t = 3.21$, $p < .01$) and expert ($\beta = .39$; $t = 3.91$, $p < .001$) power remained significant predictors.

Discussion

This research supports the overall contention that teachers' early communication behaviors influence students' POV judgments. Although causality is not claimed, it seems reasonable, based on POV Theory, to conclude that teacher behavior influences students' judgments and should impact subsequent communication. We found that students' early perceptions of instructors' use of various relational messages, including NVI, components of confirmation and conversational skills, and referent and expert power were important in predicting over half of the variance in POV judgments. Those statistics shed additional light on the importance of these findings. First, when considering the hypothesis, the strongest correlations (>.60) reported for POV judgments were those that involved instructors communicating prosocial power

Table 2 Correlations Between Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1. Predicted outcome value judgments																	
2. Coercive	−.30**																
3. Reward	.47**	−.10															
4. Referent	.73**	−.27**	.67**														
5. Legitimate	−.23**	.57**	−.21**	−.26**													
6. Expert	.68**	−.31**	.46**	.71**	−.05												
7. Conflict management	.50**	−.24**	.56**	.69**	−.19*	.56**											
8. Conversational skill	.61**	−.18*	.58**	.78**	−.27**	.54**	.66**										
9. Ego support	.60**	−.13**	.52**	.78**	.−.12**	.62**	.69**	.79**									
10. Comforting	.44**	−.01	.41**	.58**	−.09	.34**	.53**	.62**	.68**								
11. Persuasion	.35**	−.08	.39**	.53**	.04	.36**	.42**	.56**	.64**	.69**							
12. Referential skill	.66**	−.31**	.55**	.80**	−.20*	.80**	.66**	.68**	.76**	.50**	.48**						
13. Narrative skills	.50**	−.06	.57**	.71**	.19*	.46**	.52**	.75**	.71*	.62**	.62**	.61*					
14. Regulation	.55**	−.04*	.52**	.66**	−.07	.54**	.59**	.67**	.77**	.68**	.71**	.62**	.65**				
15. Nonverbal immediacy	.57**	−.15	.56**	.73**	−.25**	.50**	.52**	.69**	.63*	.49*	.53**	64*	.69**	56**			
16. Responds to questions	.50**	−.34**	.30**	.50**	−.22**	.57**	.51**	.46**	.47**	.33**	.19**	.63**	.32**	.37**	.38**		
17. Demonstrates interest	.57**	−.27**	−.49**	.69**	−.26**	.54**	.61**	.65**	.67**	.52**	.42**	.67**	60**	.57**	.62**	.71**	
18. Teaching style	.56**	−.17**	.46**	.67**	−.24**	.53**	.54**	.60**	.66**	.49**	.43**	.64**	.50**	.54**	.55**	.63**	.82**

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

along with their ability to engage students and make them feel a part of the classroom and learning experience (e.g., conversational skills, ego support skills, and referential skills). Second, *RQ1* explored the unique role that these messages play in students' judgments of instructors. This analysis revealed that, beyond NVI, two dimensions of confirmation, three conversational skills, and two power bases predicted unique variance in students' POV judgments. It is noteworthy that this model accounted for a considerable amount of variance. These findings are consistent with Frymier and Houser's (2000) results, as well as Mottet, Frymier, and Beebe's (2006) proposition that students have both rhetorical and relational needs. Thus, it appears instructors should be attentive to their relational communication early in the semester.

Collectively, these results are largely consistent with emerging instructional theory. Relational Power and Instructional Influence Theory (Mottet et al., 2006), for example, propose that instructors who communicate from prosocial power bases will experience enhanced classroom outcomes. Our analysis revealing the role that expert and referent powers play in predicting POV judgments supports this proposition. Similarly, the fact that the persuasive communication skill shares *some* conceptual overlap with behavior alteration techniques, the finding that this skill negatively predicts POV judgments is equally consistent with this theory (e.g., the theory predicts that antisocial power use is problematic for influence).

Theoretically, POV appears to be an appropriate theory for use in instructional communication research; this approach is consistent with Bippus et al.'s (2003) application of POV to the classroom. Based on our findings, it appears that students generate POV judgments of their instructors. This is consistent with prior work indicating that students form thin-slice judgments of their instructors (e.g., Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993) and, further, that POV and thin-slicing are linked (Houser, Horan, & Furler, 2007). More, important, initial POV judgments appear to be largely based on instructors' relational skills and messages.

This study has value for those who train teachers. Many teacher training programs focus on procedural issues (e.g., Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1992); however, our results suggest that it might be extremely helpful for new teachers to understand the importance of the various components of relational communication or ways to enhance relational skills. This study demonstrated correlations among relational messages, skills, and POV and the existing body of POV research indicates that initial judgments are related to influential outcomes. Thus, addressing relational messages and skills could enhance the value of training programs.

As with any study, several limitations warrant discussion. The legitimate power subscale of the Schrodt, Witt, & Turman (2007) measure had a low reliability coefficient, consistent with prior research (Horan, Martin, & Weber, 2010; Horan & Myers, 2009). Thus, results pertaining to this scale could not be interpreted, and future research should explore this measure (see footnote for further discussion of this issue[2]). Second, there is overlap in relational messages. It is unclear if this overlap is a result of the obtained relationships or the presence of an unmeasured variable. Third, given the multiple measurements of behaviors, this study may suffer from halo effects (see Feeley); extending the body of relational classroom research will reveal

more precise effects. Finally, it would have been wise to assess how many times the class had met as well as if students engaged in any out-of-class communication with their instructors. This would have allowed further control of any possible confounding variables.

Given these findings, future research should examine how other messages influence POV judgments and determine if these judgments affect end-of-semester learning outcomes. Because teaching is both a relational and a *rhetorical* process (Mottet & Beebe, 2006), researchers should examine if/how rhetorical messages relate to POV judgments. In sum, however, our findings provide compelling evidence that competent teachers communicate relational messages at the very beginning of the semester so that their students can form positive POV judgments and anticipate an encouraging semester.

Notes

[1] Twenty-five participants reported that they had the teacher they were reporting on previously, meaning impressions of the instructor were already established. Thus, these responses were not included in analyses, and the usable responses included a sample of 157 participants.

[2] Two recent studies reported that the legitimate power base barely achieved an acceptable reliability using samples of college students and teachers (Horan, Martin, & Weber, 2010; Horan & Myers, 2009). Related, using a sample of college teachers, the coercive power base was not reliable (Horan & Myers, 2009). See Goodboy, Bolkan, Myers, and Zhao (in press) for a related discussion of this scale's reliability concerns.

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