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BRIEF REPORT

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

Alan K. Goodboy & San Bolkan

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived use of instructor power bases (i.e., reward, coercive, referent, legitimate, and expert) in association with student motives for communicating with an instructor (i.e., relational, functional, participatory, excuse-making, and sycophancy) in the college classroom. Participants were 244 students who completed a questionnaire consisting of the Teacher Power Use Scale and Student Communication Motives Scale in reference to an instructor they had immediately prior to data collection. Results of a canonical correlation analysis revealed that (a) when instructors were perceived to use all three prosocial bases of power (i.e., reward, referent, and expert), students were motivated to communicate for the relational, functional, and participatory motives and, to a lesser extent, the excuse-making and sycophancy motives; and (b) when instructors were perceived to use coercive power and lacked expert power, students were motivated to communicate for excuse-making and sycophancy motives, but were unlikely to communicate for the functional motive.

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

All college instructors attempt to exert influence over their students through the use of power in the classroom. These influence attempts, which are primarily performed to achieve educational goals, have important implications for instruction and

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learning (Schrodt et al., 2008). To influence students, instructors use five bases of power in the classroom (French & Raven, 1968; McCroskey & Richmond, 1983) including *coercive* power (i.e., the power to punish students), *reward* power (i.e., the power to give rewards to or remove punishments to students), *legitimate* power (i.e., the assigned power derived from a position of authority), *expert* power (i.e., the power of appearing competent and qualified), and *referent* power (i.e., the power to make students identify with the instructor). Research on power in the classroom has revealed that prosocial bases of power (i.e., reward, expert, and referent) are positively related and antisocial bases (i.e., coercive and legitimate) are negatively related to student cognitive and affective learning (Richmond, 1990; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984; Roach, 1999; Schrodt, Witt, & Turman, 2007), and students rate instructors more favorably when they use prosocial power bases (Schrodt et al., 2008; Schrodt et al. 2008).

The collective body of research on instructor power suggests that instructors should use prosocial bases and avoid antisocial bases to create favorable student impressions and perceptions. However, beyond forming favorable perceptions of instructors, students may also be motivated to communicate differently with an instructor depending upon the type of power displayed in the classroom. In support of this notion, McCroskey and Richmond (1983) posited that student “perceptions of their teacher’s behavior, while certainly affected by what the teacher thinks and does, are direct precursors of their classroom behaviors” (p. 183). Unfortunately, research has failed to examine how students might respond to and communicate with instructors who utilize varying power bases. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine subsequent classroom behavior resulting from instructor power use.

One important way of assessing student communication behavior is grounded in the research on student motives for communicating with instructors. Martin, Myers, and Mottet (1999) identified five reasons that students report as primary motivations for communicating with an instructor. These student communication motives are *relational* (i.e., to develop an interpersonal relationship with an instructor), *functional* (i.e., to gain information about the course or the content of the course), *participatory* (i.e., to offer questions or comments in class), *excuse-making* (i.e., to explain why coursework is lacking), and *sycophancy* (i.e., to create a favorable impression with the instructor). Research suggests that both instructional and learning outcomes are related to student motives (Goodboy, Martin, & Bolkan, 2009; Martin, Cayanus, Weber, & Goodboy, 2009; Martin, Mottet, & Myers, 2000; Weber, Martin, & Cayanus, 2005; Williams & Frymier, 2007). More important, research on student motives has revealed that the way in which an instructor communicates with students in the classroom will influence these motives. This research suggests that student motives will significantly differ when instructors communicate with students in a manner that is supportive, confirming, and relationally driven (Cayanus, Martin, & Goodboy, 2009; Gendrin & Rucker, 2007; Goodboy & Myers, 2008; Mottet, Martin, & Myers, 2004; Myers, Martin, & Mottet, 2002) as opposed to a manner that is verbally aggressive and offensive (Goodboy,

Myers, & Bolkan, 2010; Myers, Edwards, Wahl, & Martin, 2007). Because student motives for communicating with an instructor are largely dependent on student perceptions that are formed as a result of quality instructor–student interactions (Myers, 2006; Goodboy et al., 2009), it is likely that an instructor’s use of prosocial versus antisocial power use will also influence student motives. To test this idea, the following hypothesis is offered:

H1: Perceived instructor use of prosocial (i.e., reward, expert, and referent) and antisocial (i.e., coercive and legitimate) power will be related to student motives for communicating with their instructor (i.e., relational, functional, participatory, excuse-making, and sycophancy).

Method

Participants

Participants were 244 undergraduate students enrolled in many introductory communication studies courses at a midsize Eastern university. Participants were 87 men and 153 women (4 unreported), whose ages ranged from 18 to 45 years ($M = 19.65$, $SD = 2.04$).

Procedures and Instrumentation

Participants completed a survey consisting of the Teacher Power Use Scale (Schrodt et al., 2007) and the Student Communication Motives Scale (Martin et al., 1999), along with demographic questions. To create variability for potential instructors, participants completed the measures in reference to the instructor and course they attended immediately prior to the data collection (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986) during the last week of the semester.

The Teacher Power Use Scale consists of 30 items that ask participants to report on instructor behaviors indicative of five power bases: coercive, reward, referent, legitimate, and expert. Responses were solicited using a 7-point Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). In this study, obtained Cronbach’s alphas for each subscale ranged from .64 to .90 (coercive: $M = 12.43$, $SD = 5.66$, $\alpha = .78$; reward: $M = 20.92$, $SD = 7.66$, $\alpha = .84$; referent: $M = 25.00$, $SD = 8.20$, $\alpha = .89$; legitimate: $M = 18.28$, $SD = 5.93$, $\alpha = .64$; and expert: $M = 31.56$, $SD = 8.25$, $\alpha = .90$).

The Student Communication Motives Scale is 30 items and asks participants to report on how frequently they communicate with their instructor for five reasons: relational, functional, participatory, excuse-making, and 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*). In this study, obtained Cronbach’s alphas for the motives ranged from .85 to .92 (relational: $M = 11.60$, $SD = 4.91$, $\alpha = .91$; functional: $M = 20.61$, $SD = 5.83$, $\alpha = .92$; participatory: $M = 14.56$, $SD = 5.78$, $\alpha = .89$; excuse-making: $M = 12.47$, $SD = 5.47$, $\alpha = .88$; and sycophancy: $M = 12.11$, $SD = 4.89$, $\alpha = .85$).

Table 1 Canonical Correlation Analysis

Variable	Canonical loadings	
	R _{c1}	R _{c2}
Set 1: Instructor power bases		
Coercive	-.14	.65
Reward	.82	.11
Referent	.93	-.18
Legitimate	.04	.15
Expert	.64	-.65
Redundancy coefficient	.40	.18
Set 2: Student motives to communicate		
Relational	.93	.28
Functional	.54	-.58
Excuse-making	.31	.46
Participatory	.62	.25
Sycophancy	.33	.47
Redundancy coefficient	.09	.02

Note. Wilks's $\Lambda = .60$; $F(25, 871) = 5.12$, $p < .001$.

Results

A canonical correlation analysis was calculated to examine *H1*. Two significant roots were discovered (Wilks's $\Lambda = .60$), $F(25, 871) = 5.12$, $p < .001$. The first root ($R_{c1} = .51$) suggested that when instructors were perceived to use all three prosocial bases of power (i.e., reward, referent, and expert), students were motivated to communicate with their instructors for the relational, functional, and participatory motives and, to a lesser extent, the excuse-making and sycophancy motives. The second root ($R_{c2} = .36$) revealed that when instructors were perceived as using coercive power and lacking expert power, students were motivated to communicate for excuse-making and sycophancy motives, but were unlikely to communicate for the functional motive (see Table 1).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine if the perceived use of instructor power in the classroom influences the motives students have for communicating with their instructor. Two significant findings emerged from the canonical correlation analysis. First, instructors who used perceived reward, expert, and referent power (i.e., prosocial power) motivated students to communicate for the relational, functional, and participatory motives and, to a lesser extent, the excuse-making and sycophancy motives. Therefore, instructors who were perceived to use all three prosocial bases appear to motivate student communication in their classroom on all accounts

because such power use may communicate to students that the instructor is approachable and competent. Indeed, students do value and look up to teachers who use these prosocial bases (Schrodt et al., 2008). Instructors, then, should be aware that using the prosocial power bases concurrently may increase overall talk time with students. However, instructors should also be aware that although the use of all three prosocial power bases may help develop the instructor–student relationship, some students may take advantage of the instructor’s kindness and approachability by creating excuses and flattering the instructor. The second finding revealed that instructors who were perceived to use coercive power and lacked expert power motivated students to communicate for excuse-making and sycophancy motives, but not for the functional motive. Therefore, instructors who lack appropriate content knowledge and who punish students may reduce student motivation for gaining information about the course or content. Perhaps, students do not communicate to clarify material because they do not perceive that the instructor knows the material in the first place. Moreover, the frequent punishments these teachers use seem to elicit student responses that are designed to protect that student; that is, making up excuses for inferior work and sucking-up to the teacher to create a more favorable impression. This root suggests that students who perceive their instructors to be punishing and lacking expertise do not want foster an interpersonal relationship and, instead, are only motivated to communicate to appear to be better students than they actually are.

The main limitation in this study involves the self-report collection method and potential confounding variables. Future research should continue to examine student responses to the use of instructor power and control for mediating and moderating variables (Chory & Goodboy, 2010). In conclusion, instructors should attempt to use reward, expert, and referent power together to keep the communication channels open for students and to foster communication that is linked directly to student learning (Martin et al., 2000). However, instructors should be judicious in the use of coercive power and make sure to maintain expert power so that functional student communication is not stifled.

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