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# Students' Self-Determination as a Consequence of Instructor Misbehaviors

James P. Baker & Alan K. Goodboy

*The study applied self-determination theory to examine detrimental effects of instructor misbehaviors in the college classroom. Participants were 223 undergraduate students who reported on their instructor's antagonism and lecture misbehaviors in a course, along with their basic psychological need fulfillment (i.e., autonomy, competence, relatedness) and intrinsic motivation to learn. Results indicated that (a) lecture misbehaviors were more detrimental to students' competence and relatedness than antagonism misbehaviors; and (b) students' intrinsic motivation to learn was influenced by students' basic psychological needs and instructor misbehaviors.*

*Keywords:* Instructor Misbehaviors; Intrinsic Motivation To Learn; Self-Determination Theory

Instructional communication scholars regularly examine how effective teaching behaviors sustain students' motivation (Frymier, 2016). To do so, researchers frequently operationalize motivation as a learning outcome that varies in *quantity* (i.e., state motivation; Christophel, 1990). However, student motivation varies in *quality* too and can be operationalized as meaningful and rewarding learning experiences that students value and appreciate (i.e., intrinsic motivation; Goldman, Goodboy, & Weber, 2017). To understand why some students experience fulfilling learning experiences when others do not, it is important to consider the role that instructors play in promoting or stifling students' needs and motivation in the classroom.

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## Self-Determination

Self-determination theory (SDT) explains human motivation assuming that individuals are agentic in their pursuit to learn new things and explore their sense of self (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT considers three basic psychological needs: competence (demonstrating one's abilities and capacities during interactions), autonomy (believing that one is the source of his/her own behavior), and relatedness (feeling connected to others) as necessary for individual growth and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The fulfillment of these needs will increase *intrinsic motivation*, which refers to an "inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70).

Instructors play an important role in facilitating or thwarting the psychological need fulfillment of students (e.g., Reeve, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2017). For instance, instructors who use controlling language, provide negative feedback, and emphasize punishments, competitions, and demands thwart their students' basic psychological needs and their intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Another way instructors could thwart their students' needs is by misbehaving in their classrooms.

## Instructor Misbehaviors

Kearney, Plax, Hays, and Ivey (1991) defined instructor misbehaviors as any teaching behaviors or techniques that inhibits students' learning. Research has demonstrated that instructor misbehaviors are associated negatively with learning outcomes including students' affective learning, cognitive learning, state motivation, and communication satisfaction (Goodboy, 2011; Goodboy & Bolkan, 2009).

Goodboy and Myers (2015) revisited the original instructor misbehavior typology due to the growing integration of technology in the classroom and the culture change among college students. They found that instructors typically misbehave in one of three general ways that interfere with learning: They misbehave with *antagonism*, which occurs when an instructor belittles students; misbehave during *lectures*, which refers to teaching in a monotone and/or confusing style of instruction; or misbehave with *articulation*, which refers to issues with accents and pronunciation. However, these authors suggested that researchers interested in general instructor misbehaviors should use the two-dimension (i.e., antagonism and lectures) measure.

Instructors who belittle students (antagonism), and/or use a monotone and unstructured style of teaching (lectures), may jeopardize students' learning potential; however, the degree to which each misbehavior thwarts students' psychological need satisfaction remains unknown. Therefore, the following research question is presented:

*RQ: Which instructor misbehavior (antagonism or lectures) is more detrimental to the fulfillment of students' basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) in the classroom?*

Self-determination theory posits that students' intrinsic motivation (to learn) is fostered when their basic psychological needs are supported in the classroom (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

*H1: Student's basic psychological needs for (a) autonomy, (b) competence, and (c) relatedness will be positively associated with their intrinsic motivation to learn, controlling for an instructor's antagonistic and lectures misbehaviors.*

## Method

### *Participants and Procedures*

The participants sampled in this study were 223 undergraduate students (86 males, 135 females, two unreported) from a mid-Atlantic university. Students ranged from 18 to 24 years ( $M = 20.05$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ). Participants completed a 20-minute online anonymous survey starting the 10th week of the semester lasting until the 15th week of the semester. Participants were instructed to reference their instructor and first class of the week.

### *Instrumentation*

#### *Instructor Misbehaviors*

Instructor misbehaviors were measured using the 13-item *Instructor Misbehavior Scale* (IMS; Goodboy & Myers, 2015). This study used the two dimensions of the IMS suggested by Goodboy and Myers: (a) antagonism (eight items;  $M = 1.23$ ,  $SD = .49$ ,  $\alpha = .91$ ) and (b) lectures (five items;  $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ ).

#### *Psychological Needs*

The Student Psychological Needs Scale (SPNS; Goldman, Goodboy, et al., 2017) is a 20-item scale that measures students' needs for autonomy (eight items;  $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ,  $\alpha = .94$ ), competence (eight items;  $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ), and relatedness with their instructor (four items;  $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ). Participant responses were solicited on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

#### *Intrinsic Motivation to Learn*

The Intrinsic Motivation to Learn Scale (Goldman, Goodboy, et al., 2017) is a 10-item scale ( $M = 4.87$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ;  $\alpha = .93$ ) that measures students' intrinsic motivation to learn course materials. Participant responses were solicited on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

## Results

The research question inquired about which instructor misbehavior was more detrimental to students' psychological needs. The results of Pearson correlations revealed that instructor misbehaviors (i.e., antagonism and lectures) were associated negatively

**Table 1** Z-score Tests for Two Dependent Correlations

	Antagonism	Lectures	Z-score	<i>p</i>
1. Autonomy	-.44	-.45	.16	.87
2. Competence	-.36	-.56	3.27	.001
3. Relatedness	-.43	-.64	3.71	<.001

with students' basic psychological needs in the classroom (see Table 1). Therefore, tests for differences with dependent correlations were computed to compare the strength of the correlation coefficients (Steiger, 1980). Z-score transformations were obtained for dependent correlations, and asymptotic covariances of these estimates were used to calculate asymptotic *z*-tests (Lee & Preacher, 2013), which served as significance tests for differences between the correlation sizes. These asymptotic *z*-tests revealed that the correlations for student competence ( $z = 3.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and relatedness ( $z = 3.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were stronger with lecture misbehaviors than antagonism misbehaviors.

The hypothesis predicted that students' basic psychological needs would be positively associated with their intrinsic motivation to learn (after controlling for instructor misbehaviors). Hypothesis 1a and 1c were supported by a hierarchical regression analysis, with autonomy and relatedness emerging as significant indicators of students' intrinsic motivation to learn. However, Hypothesis 1b was not supported, with competence failing to emerge as a significant indicator of intrinsic motivation to learn (see Table 2).

**Table 2** Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Intrinsic Motivation to Learn

	Intrinsic Motivation to Learn					
	B	SEB	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>sr</i> <sup>2</sup>
Block 1						
Antagonism	-.805	.161	-.323	-5.008	<.001	.086
Lectures	-.354	.068	-.337	-5.224	<.001	.094
$F(2, 201) = 44.633$ , $p < .001$						
$R^2 = .31$						
Block 2						
Antagonism	-.383	.145	-.154	-2.640	.009	.017
Lectures	.021	.074	.020	.291	.772	.000
Autonomy	.246	.053	.290	4.611	<.001	.053
Competence	.050	.062	.055	.808	.420	.002
Relatedness	.351	.064	.400	5.452	<.001	.213
$F(5, 198) = 40.820$ , $p < .001$						
$R^2 = .51$ ; $\Delta R^2 = .20$						

Note. VIF scores range from 1.206 to 2.163, which suggests that multicollinearity is not an issue.

## Discussion

This study demonstrated that students are not self-determined when their instructors misbehave and that instructors who want their students to find their coursework meaningful and personally fulfilling should refrain from misbehaving. First, the results revealed that students' psychological needs for competence and relatedness were stifled more by lecture misbehaviors. Rhetorical and relational goal theory (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006) suggests that this may be because students have both rhetorical and relational needs but are *not* driven equally by each need. Goldman, Cranmer, Sollitto, Labelle, and Lancaster (2017) found that when students were forced to prioritize effective instructor behaviors for their "ideal professor," they consistently preferred instructors who fulfilled their rhetorical needs (i.e., clear and competent dissemination of material) and considered relational instructor behaviors (i.e., immediacy and self-disclosure) as more of a luxury. In this regard, although students may appreciate both rhetorical and relational instructor behaviors, they prefer rhetorical instruction so they can learn, even at the expense of relational teaching behaviors (Goldman, Cranmer, et al., 2017), which may explain why lecture misbehaviors are more detrimental toward students' psychological need fulfillment.

Second, the results of this study found that students' psychological needs for autonomy and relatedness were uniquely associated with their intrinsic motivation to learn, after controlling for instructor misbehaviors. Specifically, incorporating students' needs into the model accounted for an additional 20% of the variance of their intrinsic motivation to learn. These results support SDT's proposition that students' intrinsic motivation to learn is contingent upon their psychological needs being supported or thwarted.

The primary limitation of this study was that we focused on two instructor misbehavior dimensions. Future research should more closely examine specific instructor misbehaviors at the behavioral level. Additionally, although results add to the understanding of how instructor misbehaviors impact students' intrinsic motivation to learn, our claims must be tempered with the fact that this study used a cross-sectional survey method and does not allow for causal claims. Future research should use experimental designs to manipulate specific instructor misbehaviors and examine effects on simulated learning.

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