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A Measure of Student-Instructor Relationships (Sirs)

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Although some scholars view achievement motivation as a disposition, it has been documented across all grade levels that achievement orientations (e.g., effort regulation; self efficacy) are amenable to change in individual classroom settings. In the present study, we monitored changes in achievement orientations based on achievement messages communicated by instructors to students, teacher immediacy, and the development of the student-instructor relationship. Although this model is supported by theory, it is difficult to locate longitudinal studies that specify this process. It was our prediction that highly immediate instructors, and instructors who emulated positive achievement messages (e.g., mastery objectives) would possess students who would eventually develop connected; non-threatening relationships with them and such students would ultimately develop positive achievement orientations. These predictions were tested via the assessment of achievement messages, teacher immediacy, student-instructor relationships and emerging achievement orientations in a single, randomly determined class over the course of a semester involving a collegiate sample.

1) What variables predict the development of connected, non-threatening relationships with instructors?  
- Communication researchers have documented that instructors who display high rates of teacher immediacy (e.g., learns the names of students; smiles at students; responds effectively to student questions) are viewed as highly effective instructors. In addition, educational researchers have documented that instructors who communicate positive achievement messages (e.g., stresses mastery of learning objectives) are rated as more effective by students than instructors who display less optimal messages (e.g., stresses performance objectives). Thus, we expected that both communicative and educational messages would impact the student-instructor relationship.

2) What role does teacher immediacy, instructor achievement messages and student-instructor relationships play in predicting changes in achievement orientations?  
- We predicted all three variables would play a role; however, predicted that student-instructor relationships would mediate the association between teacher immediacy, instructor achievement messages and positive achievement orientations.

Students were recruited and asked to provide a list of their class schedule. Next, we randomly selected a tradition collegiate class and designated this class as their “target class” for the semester. Thus, the students completed measures throughout the semester for this target class (chosen by us; students were not allowed to rate any courses that we taught). The first week of class, students completed an achievement orientation measure to establish a baseline measure for how they normally approach learning situations (e.g., self-efficacy). Next, over the course of the semester, they completed the same achievement measure for their targeted class, and also provided ratings of their instructor and relationship with this instructor.

METHOD

Participants: Seventy students completed the following measures throughout the semester pertaining to their “targeted” class.

Instructor Achievement Messages: Students completed the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (Midgley et al., 2000) and were asked to consider the classroom mastery goal structure emulated by their instructor. High ratings would be indicative of an instructor who stressed mastery of the course material as a central course goal, and includes items such as, “In our class, really understanding the material is the main goal”; or, “in our class, it’s OK to make mistakes as long as you are learning”.

Teacher Immediacy: The Teacher Immediacy Scale (Gorman, 1988; Thomas, 2001), contains items that assess verbal (e.g., “Talks to students before class”; “Asks questions or encourages student to talk”) and nonverbal (e.g., “Looks at class while talking”) features of instructor, communicative behavior.

Student-Instructor Relationships: We have developed a 36-item measure that assesses relationships between students and instructors. The instrument contains 2 major scales: Connectedness (“I feel comfortable sharing my thoughts with this instructor”; “I could tell this instructor just about anything”), and Anxiety (“This instructor makes me doubt myself”; “I am nervous around this instructor”).

Positive Achievement Orientations: Self-directed learners are autonomous, confident students; thus, student confidence and perceptions of control over the learning environment are central elements of learner autonomy. To assess these constructs, students completed that Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (Pintrich et al., 1991). This instrument contains 2 scales relevant for the study questions: 1) Perceptions of control over the learning environment (e.g., “If I study in appropriate ways, then I will be able to learn the material in this course”) and 2) Self-efficacy (“I’m confident I can understand the basic concepts taught in this course”). At the beginning of the semester, students completed this measure in terms of how they approach learning situations and classes in general; this assessment provided a baseline measure for these appraisals.

The baseline achievement measure was used as a control variable in all analyses. Because we had multiple assessments of achievement orientations, the results analyses tapped changes in perceptions of control over the learning environment and student self-efficacy across the semester in the target class. Students reported more confidence ($t = 48.70, p < .0001$) and greater perception of control ($t = 46.57, p < .0001$) over the course of the semester when comparing the final assessment (last 2 weeks of class) to the first.

1) What predicts the development of the student-instructor relationship? A regression analysis was conducted regressing the student-instructor relationship scales to elements of teacher immediacy and positive achievement messages. In terms of predicting instructor connectedness, both verbal ($β = .46, p < .0001$) and nonverbal ($β = .29, p < .0001$) immediacy were significantly associated with this instructor, whereas positive instructor achievement messages ($β = .17, p < .10$) were only marginally related. In terms of predicting instructor anxiety, only nonverbal immediacy was significantly associated with this relationship dimension ($β = .38, p < .01$). The negative beta weight would signify that more anxious students tend to have instructors who display low rates of instructor immediacy (e.g., does not look at students while talking; has a tense body position while talking).

3) What predicts changes in positive achievement orientations across the semester? Controlling for baseline achievement orientations, the scale that assessed student perceptions of control over the learning environment was regressed on earlier assessments of instructor immediacy, positive instructor achievement messages and student-instructor relationships. In this regression analysis, elements of the student instructor relationship completely mediated associations between student perceptions of control, teacher immediacy and positive achievement messages communicated by the instructor. This finding was replicated when analyzing changes in student confidence. These results imply that the development of some form of relationship between the student and instructor is paramount for positive changes in achievement orientations.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study were strong, and consistent with cross-sectional findings we have documented in the past concerning the associations between our study variables. However, the results of the present study are particularly strong in light of the fact that 1) Psychometrically strong assessments were used; 2) Baseline measures of achievement orientations were assessed; 3) The study was longitudinal; 4) The researchers dictated the class the students evaluated and, the researchers were not the instructors of these students (which could lead to response biases). We documented that the relationships that develop between students and instructors are based on part by the achievement messages instructors communicate to students (e.g., importance of mastery goals); however, the “way” these messages are communicated to students as a result of instructor immediacy appears to be a vital component to the effectiveness of these messages. This finding is supported by the finding that connected, non-threatening relationships between students and instructors mediate associations between instructor achievement messages and changes in achievement orientations. In short, the results suggest if the student-instructor relationship is negative, learning may not take place because the students are uncomfortable and not confident learners. Because some of the students we assessed were in large classes, there is a suggestion inherent in our work that students may feel connected to certain immediate instructors, but may not have routine (or any) contact or interactions with these instructors. This finding would imply that this relationship may largely reside on the mental level of the student, but nevertheless, represent a very important schema that influences their view of the instructor and class.