# The Interrelationship of Student Ratings of Instructors' Immediacy, Verbal Aggressiveness, Homophily, and Interpersonal Attraction

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*This study explored the relationships of immediacy and verbal aggression with homophily and interpersonal attraction in the instructional context. Immediacy was negatively related to verbal aggression and positively related to all dimensions of homophily and interpersonal attraction. Verbal aggression was also found to be negatively related to both dimensions of homophily and all three dimensions of interpersonal attraction. It is recommended that the relationship between verbal aggression and immediacy be examined in greater detail, including possible interactions between these variables and various instructional outcomes.* **Keywords:** immediacy, nonverbal immediacy, verbal aggression, homophily, interpersonal attraction, instruction, teacher evaluation

The concept of immediacy has received much attention in instructional communication literature over the past two decades. Numerous studies have been conducted using immediacy as a central or underlying concept (for a summary of the early research in this area, see McCroskey & Richmond, 1992). Social psychologist Albert Mehrabian (1971) defined the construct of immediacy in terms of his "principle of immediacy." This principle states "people are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, and prefer; and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer" (Mehrabian, 1971, p. 1). Immediacy relates to approach and avoidance behaviors and can be thought of as the perceived distance between people (Mehrabian, 1971). This social psychological perspective suggests that positive affect causes people to become more immediate, while negative affect causes reduced immediacy.

While immediacy has received some attention from communication scholars interested in interpersonal and/or organizational communication, it has been researched primarily in the context of the college classroom. Several studies have been conducted looking at immediacy behaviors of teachers during instructional communication with their students. These studies have found teachers' immediacy to be associated with more positive student affect as well as increased cognitive learning and more positive student evaluations of the immediate teachers. This pattern of results has been observed both in the U.S. and in a variety of other cultures (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1994; Kelley & Gorham, 1988; McCroskey, Fayer, Richmond, Sallinen, & Barraclough, 1996; McCroskey, Richmond, Sallinen, Fayer, & Barraclough, 1995; McCroskey, Sallinen, Fayer, Richmond, & Barraclough, 1996; Richmond, 1990). In several of these studies, the results indicate that the causal

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direction of these relationships may be the reverse of those suggested by Mehrabian's principle. That is, the immediate behavior has been found to precede, rather than follow, the positive affect or other desired outcome (Frymier, 1994; Kelley & Gorham, 1988). While these findings do not rule out a cyclical process of positive affect and immediacy building on each other, they establish the fact that immediate behavior can be a causal factor with regard to level of positive affect as well as an outcome of that affect. This suggests, therefore, the strong possibility that teacher immediacy is associated with other affect-based student perceptions of teachers. Two of these include perceived homophily and interpersonal attraction.

## Homophily and Interpersonal Attraction

Homophily and interpersonal attraction are also believed to have an impact on student learning in the classroom and student evaluations of their teachers. Both variables have been shown to affect the amount as well as the quality of communication between sender and receiver within the interpersonal communication context (McCroskey, Hamilton, & Weiner, 1974).

Rogers and Bhowmik (1971) define homophily as the amount of similarity two people perceive themselves as having. They noted that similarity between two communicators increases the quantity of communication attempts and the effectiveness of those attempts. The "principle of homophily" states that the more two communicators see themselves as similar, the more likely they are to communicate with one another, to understand one another, and to engage in future interaction with one another (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1971). Students who see themselves as similar to teachers would then be more likely to communicate with and understand their teachers, a process which is crucial to the desired outcomes in a classroom setting.

McCroskey, Hamilton, and Weiner (1974) noted that receivers' own attitudes, beliefs, and values should influence the perceptions of the source. If teachers share similar attitudes, beliefs, and values with their students, they would seemingly be perceived by their students as more like themselves. Students are also more likely to expose themselves to a teacher whom they see as similar to themselves (Wheeless, 1974). Seemingly then, homophily would be an important element in instruction. If students perceive their teachers as more similar to them, they would be more likely to interact with their teachers and to understand what their teachers are trying to communicate about, a critical aspect in the learning process.

Message recipients are more likely to selectively expose themselves to sources whom they perceive as similar to themselves (McCroskey et al., 1974). Students are more likely to expose themselves to teachers seen as similar to themselves as well. This exposure is the first step leading to increased cognitive learning in the immediacy model (Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Frymier, 1994; McCroskey et al., 1974).

The link (if any) between immediacy and homophily is not immediately clear. Not all students are immediate, hence having an immediate teacher would not necessarily communicate similarity on that basis. However, if teacher immediacy communicates liking, this may trigger a reciprocity response in students (Gouldner, 1960) whether they are immediate themselves or not. The principle of immediacy would suggest that the student would have more generally positive affect toward the teacher and hence have an increased sense of desire to approach her/him. This affect may generalize to a perception of homophily. While this is a relatively limited rationale

for a hypothesized positive relationship between immediacy and homophily, there is no reason to expect a negative relationship. Therefore, the first hypothesis was proposed:

H1: There is a positive relationship between teacher immediacy and perceived homophily.

Interpersonal attraction is composed of three dimensions: task, physical, and social (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). Sources who have high interpersonal attraction, especially on all three dimensions, are seen as more credible and more persuasive (McCroskey et al., 1974). Thus, interpersonal attraction also seems to be a positive attribute of teachers in the classroom setting.

Teachers should be seen as having high task, social, and physical attraction when they are more immediate. The reciprocity principle (Gouldner, 1960) applies more directly here than to homophily (noted above). This principle indicates that there is a strong tendency of people in communication settings to respond in ways similar to those of others with whom they are communicating. Since the principle of immediacy indicates that immediacy behaviors are stimulated by positive affect, it is likely that immediate teachers are seen as liking students; hence it is more likely that the students will engage in immediate behaviors toward the teachers—liking behaviors stimulate liking behaviors. It is reasonable, then, to hypothesize that this will result in increased perceptions of teacher attractiveness. Thus, the second hypothesis was proposed:

H2: There is a positive relationship between teacher immediacy and perceived interpersonal attractiveness.

## Verbal Aggression

Since its conceptualization, verbal aggression has received much attention in the literature (Infante & Rancer, 1996; Infante & Wigley, 1986), and much research has been conducted regarding verbal aggression. Aggression can be distinguished as physical or symbolic. The focus here is on the symbolic, or verbal aggression. This type of aggression is defined by Infante (1987) as "using verbal and nonverbal communication channels in order, minimally, to dominate and perhaps damage or, maximally, to defeat and perhaps destroy another person's position on topics of communication and/or the other person's self-concept" (p. 164). There are several ways of being verbally aggressive, including "character attacks, competence attacks, insults, maledictions, teasing, ridicule, profanity, threats, and nonverbal indicators" (Infante, 1987, p. 182). All of these are methods of attack with potentially damaging effects.

Whether a message is perceived as verbally aggressive or not depends on four different viewpoints as proposed by Infante (1987, 1988). These include the perspectives of the individual, the dyad, an observer, and society. Verbal aggression (VA) may occur on one or more of these levels, which makes it somewhat difficult to define what is and what is not verbal aggression. Defining verbal aggression thus depends on which point of view is being considered. All of these perspectives are valid and depend on the circumstances under which the potential verbal aggression occurs (Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994). When it comes to teachers' verbal aggression, then, it is important to obtain students' perceptions of their instructors.

## Immediacy and Verbal Aggression

Comstock, Rowell, and Bowers (1995) noted that teachers who communicate in a positive manner with their students are thought of as more immediate and by doing so, they encourage student learning. This is incompatible with any type of verbal aggression in the classroom. Verbal aggression and immediacy seem incompatible because immediacy produces perceptions of responsiveness whereas verbal aggression does not.

Kearney, Plax, Hays, and Ivey (1991) found that offensive behaviors engaged in by teachers, including using sarcasm and putdowns, being verbally abusive toward students, sexually harassing students, and having a negative personality had a negative impact in the classroom and on student learning. This lends further support to the notion that verbal aggression and immediacy should be negatively related in the classroom setting.

Martin, Weber, and Burant (1997) found that instructors who used verbally aggressive messages were perceived by students as less competent, less immediate, and less appropriate than those who did not use verbal aggression. Teachers who used verbally aggressive messages were also less likely to be hired for a teaching job in this experiment. Martin, Weber, and Burant concluded that it would be better for teachers to avoid using verbal aggression. It seems that immediacy and verbal aggression have conflicting effects in the classroom setting. To replicate the findings above, a third hypothesis was proposed:

H3: There is a negative relationship between teacher immediacy and teacher verbal aggression.

Since it has been hypothesized that immediacy will have a negative relationship with verbal aggression, seemingly then, verbal aggression might be expected to be negatively related to any concept that immediacy is positively related to in the instructional setting. Two research questions are posed to look at these relationships:

RQ1: What is the relationship between teacher verbal aggression and perceived homophily?
RQ2: What is the relationship between teacher verbal aggression and perceived interpersonal attractiveness?

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 167 undergraduate students in a large, upper-division service course in Communication Studies at a large Middle-Atlantic university. The sample consisted of 98 males, 64 females, and 5 participants who did not reveal their sex. The mean age of the sample was 21.68 with a standard deviation of 2.85. Participation was voluntary and earned minimal class credit. All participation took place during regular class time. Students were asked to fill out a questionnaire based on the teacher that they had in the class just prior to the one in which they completed the questionnaire. Thus, students did not need to think back further than their last class period. The procedure used assures that teachers will be from a wide variety of disciplines and the classes would be more diverse than if they all filled the scales out on the teacher in their current class. This procedure has been used successfully in many previous studies (Christophel, 1990; Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Gorham, 1988; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Kearney, Plax, & Wendt-Wasco, 1985; McCroskey, Fayer, et al., 1996; McCroskey et al., 1995;

McCroskey, Sallinen, et al., 1996; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986; Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994).

## Instruments

A questionnaire was distributed with a modified 10-item version of the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (Infante & Wigley, 1986), the 10-item Nonverbal Immediacy Measure (Thomas et al., 1994), the Measure of Perceived Homophily (McCroskey, Richmond, & Daly, 1975), the Measure of Interpersonal Attraction (McCroskey & McCain, 1974), and demographic questions.

The Verbal Aggression Scale (VA) has been found to be both reliable and valid in assessing verbal aggression (Infante & Wigley, 1986). In its original form, it was a 20-item Likert-type scale with response categories ranging from almost never true (1) to almost always true (5). The scale includes 10 positively worded and 10 negatively worded items. The version used for this study included five positively worded and five negatively worded items adapted to fit the instructional environment. The reliability has been .80 or above in several studies (Infante & Rancer, 1996).

Even when the scale was adapted, it has been shown to have reliabilities of .79 to .92 (Bayer & Cegala, 1992; Boster & Levine, 1988; Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Infante & Gorden, 1989). This is of particular importance here due to the fact that the scale used in this study was adapted to fit the teaching environment. It was adapted so that each item read "my instructor" rather than "I." The scale has also been found to have face and logical validity (DeWine, Nicotera, & Parry, 1991) and construct validity (Infante & Rancer, 1996). Obtained reliability for the 10-item VA scale in this study was .88.

The Nonverbal Immediacy Measure (NIM: Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987) has been shown in numerous studies to be both reliable and valid. It has been found to be reliable for both students and teachers (Gorham & Zakahi, 1990). The NIM has been found to consistently have good reliabilities (.70 or higher) in numerous studies (Thomas et al., 1994). The NIM has also been shown to have good predictive validity (McCroskey, Fayer, et al., 1996). The revised 10-item version was used here because of previous studies where four of the items were considered poor items (McCroskey, Sallinen, et al., 1996). The four items eliminated concerned behaviors of sitting, standing, and touching. Obtained reliability for the 10-item scale in this study was .84.

The Perceived Homophily Scale, originally developed by McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly (1975), is intended to measure perceived similarities between the source and receiver on a series of bi-polar scales. Here, a newer version of the scale was used which had two primary factors which were independent from one another. The original scale had four factors called attitude, morality, appearance, and background (McCroskey, Richmond, & Daly, 1975) whereas the newer version has three factors, attitude, background, and appearance (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). The appearance dimension was not considered appropriate for the present research, and thus was omitted. The attitude and background factors on this scale have been found to be uncorrelated with one another (McCroskey et al., 1975), so each was analyzed separately. Obtained reliability for the 4-item attitude homophily measure in this study was .87 and obtained reliability for the 4-item background homophily measure in this study was .69.

The Measure of Interpersonal Attraction was developed by McCroskey and

TABLE 1

CORRELATIONS OF IMMEDIACY AND VERBAL AGGRESSION WITH OTHER PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS

| Other Perceptions | Immediacy | Verbal Aggression |
|---|---|---|
| Background Homophily | .22 | −.17 |
| Attitude Homophily | .51 | −.34 |
| Physical Attractiveness | .45 | −.28 |
| Task Attractiveness | .36 | −.52 |
| Social Attractiveness | .58 | −.47 |

*All correlations statistically significant, $p < .05$.

McCain (1974) to measure three types of interpersonal attraction. The scale measures task (desire to work with someone), social (desire to socialize with someone), and physical (desire based on physical appearance) attraction for a specified source. In this study, the teacher was the specified source. Each dimension of attraction is scored separately. Obtained reliabilities for these four-item, Likert-type measures were .78 for social, .69 for task, and .83 for physical.

## Results

The mean for the 10-item Verbal Aggression Scale was 18.64 out of a possible 50 with a standard deviation of 7.42. The mean for the Nonverbal Immediacy Measure was 33.13 out of a possible 50 ($SD = 7.25$). The mean for the Measure of Perceived Homophily on the attitude dimension was 15.05 out of a possible 28 ($SD = 5.86$), and 15.00 out of a possible 28 ($SD = 5.28$) for background homophily. The mean for the Measure of Interpersonal Attraction was 22.45 ($SD = 4.79$) for task attraction, 12.76 ($SD = 5.47$) for physical attraction, and 18.68 ($SD = 5.77$) for social attraction. Means for all attraction measures were out of a possible 28.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that there was a positive relationship between teacher immediacy and perceived homophily. The obtained correlation supported this hypothesis, $r = .51$, $p < .01$ for attitude homophily, and $r = .22$, $p < .01$ for background homophily (see Table 1). Thus, teachers who are more immediate are perceived by students as more similar to themselves both in attitude and background.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that there was a positive relationship between teacher immediacy and interpersonal attraction. Hypothesis 2 was supported by all three obtained correlations, $r = .36$, $p < .01$ for task attraction, $r = .45$, $p < .01$ for physical attraction, and $r = .58$, $p < .01$ for social attraction (see Table 1). Thus, more immediate teachers are perceived as more task, physically, and socially attractive to their students than teachers low in immediacy.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that there was a negative relationship between teacher immediacy and teacher verbal aggression. Results of a Pearson correlation supported this hypothesis, $r = -.35$, $p < .01$. Teachers who are more immediate are seen as less verbally aggressive, and teachers who are more verbally aggressive are seen as less immediate.

Research Question 1 asked what the relationship was between teacher verbal aggression and perceived homophily. Obtained correlations were negative for both homophily factors, $r = -.34$, $p < .01$ for attitude homophily and $r = -.17$, $p < .05$ for background homophily (see Table 1). Teachers who are verbally aggressive are

perceived by their students as dissimilar to themselves in terms of both attitude and background.

Research Question 2 asked what the relationship was between teacher verbal aggression and perceived interpersonal attractiveness. Again, negative relationships were observed, $r = -.52$, $p < .01$ for task attraction, $r = -.28$, $p < .03$ for physical attraction, and $r = -.47$, $p < .01$ for social attraction. Teachers who were verbally aggressive were also perceived as less interpersonally attractive by their students on all three dimensions of attractiveness.

## Discussion

The main goal of this study was to assess the relationships among teacher immediacy behaviors, teacher verbal aggression, and students' perceptions of homophily and interpersonal attractiveness. It was found that as perceived immediacy increased, perceived verbal aggression decreased in the instructional context. Verbally aggressive messages are believed to be sent with the intent of harming the receiver, whereas immediate messages are believed to be sent with the intent of helping the receiver and making the communication more effective. Teachers who use verbal aggression are seen as less immediate and teachers who are immediate are seen as less verbally aggressive.

It appears that immediate behaviors may be somewhat incongruent with verbally aggressive behaviors; however, they definitely are not opposites. Verbal aggression often is accompanied by such immediate behaviors as direct eye contact, forward leans, and high vocal variety. Future research needs to probe the relationship between verbal aggression and immediacy. The correlation between immediacy and verbal aggression, although statistically significant and in the hypothesized direction, is modest–accounting for approximately 12% shared variance. The relationship between these two variables may be much more complex than was presumed in the current research.

Immediacy was positively related to both dimensions of homophily, although the relationship with attitude homophily was stronger than that of background homophily. More immediacy is associated with more perceived similarity.

Teachers who are immediate are also seen as interpersonally attractive to their students. This was found for task, social, and physical attraction. All correlations were moderate, suggesting a stable relationship between all types of attraction and teacher immediacy. More immediacy is associated with greater attraction.

As expected, verbal aggression was negatively related to both homophily and interpersonal attraction. This again supports the conflicting nature of immediacy and verbal aggression. Immediacy was positively correlated with all of the dimensions of homophily and interpersonal attraction, whereas verbal aggression was negatively correlated with these same dimensions. Teachers who are verbally aggressive are seen as less immediate, less similar to students, and less interpersonally attractive to students.

All of the hypotheses in this study were supported. However, all of these results are based on correlational analyses. Given that previous research has established that immediacy has a causal relationship with other desired outcomes in the instructional context, we certainly are justified in hypothesizing that the correlations obtained in the present study are produced by immediacy functioning as a causal agent. However, that hypothesis needs to be tested directly in subsequent research.

Since immediacy has been found to be beneficial to student learning and other desired instructional outcomes, and verbal aggression has been shown to have potentially very destructive effects, future research could focus on the interaction between these two behavior repertoires in the classroom. One area to look at would be the verbal aggression and/or immediacy of students in the classroom and how these impact teachers' tendencies to engage in immediate and/or verbally aggressive behaviors. While both immediacy and verbal aggressiveness are traits of individuals, they are not independent of the contexts within which the individual functions. Such contexts provide the triggers for trait responses. Hence, understanding the extent to which teacher behavior is dependent on student behavior in a given context would provide useful information to those concerned with improving teacher communication competencies.

Immediacy is a trait, but one which can be modified through training. Teachers can improve their immediacy behaviors through practice (Gorham & Zakahi, 1990). If teachers know what to do to be more immediate, and know the tremendous impact of immediacy in the classroom, they can become more effective teachers. Teacher evaluations are also impacted by student perceptions of immediacy (McCroskey, Sallinen, et al., 1996; Moore, Masterson, Christophel, & Shea, 1996). Teachers who have higher immediacy scores also receive higher evaluations from their students (Moore et al., 1996). McCroskey, Richmond, Sallinen, Fayer, and Barraclough (1995) also found this to be true in that increased immediacy across cultures led to higher evaluations by students in all four cultures they studied. If only for selfish purposes, enhancing immediacy and reducing verbal aggressiveness may serve to enhance the professional lives of teachers.

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