

# The Effect of Teacher Misbehaviors on Teacher Credibility and Affect for the Teacher

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*This study investigated the effect of teacher misbehavior on student affect for the teacher and teacher credibility. Participants completed an Affect Toward Teacher Scale and a Source Credibility Scale in reference to one of four experimental conditions. The first two research questions examined the effect of misbehaviors on student affect for the teacher. Each misbehavior type was shown to have a significant impact on student affect for the teacher. Teacher “offensiveness” was found to impact affect the most. The second and third research questions examined the effect of misbehavior on teacher credibility. Credibility was significantly impacted by each individual type of misbehavior, with competence impacted the most by “incompetence,” and caring and trustworthiness impacted the most by “offensiveness.”*

*Keywords: Teacher Misbehaviors; Affect for Teacher; Teacher Source Credibility; Competence; Caring; Trustworthiness*

A considerable amount of research has been conducted on what “good” teachers do, but considerably less has been done on what “bad” teachers do. Kearney, Plax, Hays, and Ivey (1991) reported the first communication study that focused on teacher behaviors that students do not like. From this research emerged the concept of “teacher misbehavior.” Teacher misbehavior has been defined as any teacher behavior that interferes negatively with instruction or student learning (Kearney et al., 1991), such as being absent, confusing the students, using sarcasm, giving boring lectures, grading unfairly, showing favoritism, and many other negatively perceived teacher behaviors. Previous research has been able to identify 27 different categories of

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teacher misbehaviors, having three underlying dimensions: teacher incompetence, indolence and offensiveness, (Kearney et al., 1991).

*Incompetence* in teaching refers to a lack of basic teaching skills, such as lecturing in monotone, providing confusing instructions, and holding unreasonable student expectations (Kearney et al., 1991). *Offensiveness* in teaching is an instructor's general tendency to verbally abuse students, such as humiliating, embarrassing, or insulting students (Kearney et al., 1991). *Indolence*, defined as a teacher's disregard for students, would include misbehaviors of missing or arriving late to class or dismissing students early (Kearney et al., 1991). Theoretically, these three factors are independent of each other; consequently, instructors can engage in some or many of the behaviors and be labeled as misbehaving (Dolin, 1995).

The basic theory advanced by Kearney et al. (1991) in their original and subsequent work is that what teachers say and do is likely to stimulate either negative or positive outcomes for students (i.e., reduced or enhanced cognitive and/or affective learning) and for themselves (negative or positive teacher evaluations). Presumably, then, both students and teachers would profit from the identification and reduction of teacher behaviors which are seen by students as misbehaviors. The present study sought to determine whether these misbehaviors actually do affect some instructional outcomes and, if so, whether the different types of misbehaviors impact instructional outcomes in different ways and to different degrees.

### **Teacher Misbehavior**

Incompetence in teachers has been defined as a group of behaviors that imply the teacher does not care about the course and/or the students (Kearney, Plax, & Allen, 2002). Incompetent teachers fail to learn and use student names, make tests too hard, are unwilling to help students succeed, and/or present poor lectures. They may bore or confuse students, overload them with information, mispronounce words, or speak with accents that students do not understand (Kearney et al., 2002). These characteristics reflect a basic lack of teaching skills (Dolin, 1995).

Teachers who are considered indolent are often compared to the "absent-minded professor." Indolent teachers might fail to show up for classes, arrive late, forget test dates, neglect grading, and return papers late. Other behaviors of indolent teachers can include constantly changing assignments and making classes and tests too easy (Kearney et al., 2002). Not all students would regard indolent teacher behaviors as negative, but others will recognize that indolence can interfere with their learning.

Offensive teachers are ones who humiliate students, play favorites, intimidate, and/or are generally condescending, rude, and/or self-centered. Offensive teachers can be sarcastic, verbally abusive, arbitrary, and unreasonable (Kearney et al., 2002). Important to our understanding of teacher misbehaviors is how those different misbehavior types influence students' perceptions of teacher credibility.

### Teacher or Source Credibility

"Ethos" (the classical term for this concept) or source credibility (the more commonly used term today) has been defined as an attitude of a receiver which references the degree to which a source is perceived to be believable (McCroskey, 1998). Teacher credibility, then, references the degree to which the students perceive the teacher to be believable. Researchers argue that credibility has the potential to affect all communication events (McCroskey, 1971; McCroskey & Teven, 1999; McCroskey & Young, 1981). If students do not perceive a teacher to be credible, for example, they will likely listen and learn less from that teacher (McCroskey, Holdridge, & Toomb, 1974).

Each of the three components of source credibility, competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill (more commonly referred to as "caring" in instructional research) makes a contribution to how a teacher is perceived (McCroskey, & Teven, 1999). Competence is the degree to which a teacher is perceived to know what he or she is talking about (McCroskey, 1998). Trustworthiness is the degree to which a teacher is perceived to be honest (McCroskey, 1998). Goodwill is the degree to which a teacher is perceived to care about the student's best interests (McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Teven & McCroskey, 1997).

### Affect for Teacher

Teachers must be aware that they are not only providing facts and information but also impacting how students perceive them as individuals. Teacher affect is a combination of students' respect and liking for the teacher. If the teacher is able to increase the affect of their students for them, positive instructional outcomes are likely to occur. In contrast, if teachers engage in misbehaviors, students' affect for them will likely be reduced, and negative instructional outcomes will result (Kearney et al., 1991). While we understand the larger impact of teacher misbehavior on affect for the teacher, we have little indication of those types of teacher misbehaviors which are likely to have more, or less, impact on students' affect for the teacher. The present research was designed to provide initial information concerning these associations.

Most researchers have examined the concept of teacher misbehavior as a whole or as separate individual misbehaviors rather than the categories presented here. Because little has been done with each of the misbehavior types, the following research questions were posed:

- RQ1: Do teacher misbehaviors of incompetence, indolence, and/or offensiveness impact student affect for the teacher?
- RQ2: If the answer to RQ1 is "yes," then how do the different teacher misbehavior types impact students' affect for the teacher?

The first research question addresses the general impact of teachers who misbehave compared to teachers who do not misbehave. The second research question focuses



on the comparative impact of the different kinds of misbehavior. In both cases, the concern is with the affect for the teacher.

The remaining research questions focused on the impact of teacher misbehaviors on student perceptions of teacher credibility.

RQ3: Do teacher incompetence, indolence, and/or offensive misbehavior types impact students' perceptions of teacher credibility?

RQ4: If the answer to RQ3 is "yes" for any or all of the credibility dimensions, then how do the different teacher misbehavior types impact teacher credibility?

The third research question addresses the general impact of teachers who misbehave compared to teachers who do not. The fourth research question focuses on the comparative impact of the different types of misbehaviors on one or more of the credibility dimensions of competence, trustworthiness and goodwill/caring.

## Methods

This study was designed to investigate the effects of teacher misbehaviors on students' affect for the teacher and students' perceptions of teacher credibility. The following procedures were implemented.

### *Design and Analysis*

An experiment was conducted with four parallel conditions. Participants were provided alleged students' comments about a single teacher. In each of the four conditions, the students were provided 12 student comments. In the control condition, all 12 comments were positive. The items were: (1) The teacher is very clean and well dressed. (2) The teacher's tests in this class are well matched with the content taught in the class. (3) The content in this class is very important to my major. (4) The teacher is very well versed in the content in this class. (5) The teacher returns tests and papers promptly and with helpful comments on them. (6) The teacher is warm and approachable. (7) The requirements that this teacher has are reasonable and can be met by all the students. (8) The teacher is very prompt and makes sure that we get out in time to make it to our next class. (9) The teacher knows all our names and calls us by the name we like. (10) The teacher's lectures are dynamic and easy to learn from. (11) The teacher is very concerned that I do well in the class. (12) The teacher follows the syllabus closely.

In the second condition, three of those positive comments were replaced with three incompetent teacher comments: (4) The teacher does not know the subject matter - sometimes I think I know more than this teacher. (7) The teacher has unreasonable expectations, no one can do the amount of work this teacher thinks we should do. (10) The teacher lectures in a monotone voice - it is hard to stay awake, much less learn. In the third condition, three positive comments were replaced with three indolent teacher comments: (5) The teacher takes weeks to give a paper or test back, and then there are no helpful comments. (8) The teacher regularly arrives late to class

and makes students wait. (11) The teacher assigns a lot of homework but does not seem to care whether we do it or not. In the fourth condition, three positive comments were replaced with three offensive teacher comments: (6) When talking to me this teacher stands too close and touches me inappropriately. (9) The teacher refuses to use my name, and calls me dummy instead. (12) The teacher lets other students take make-up tests, but will not let me do so even though it says on the syllabus I can.

### *Participants*

Participants were 288 undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses at a large mid-Atlantic university. Approximately half the students were female, and half were male. Their modal age was 19, most were sophomores, and over 95% were Caucasian. In exchange for extra credit, student volunteers completed the questionnaires during class time. Students were instructed to complete the research instruments (which were approved by the University's IRB) with reference to the teacher description that they were provided along with the questionnaire. Participants were randomly assigned to four experimental conditions ( $n=72$  per condition).

### *Measures and Analyses*

After reading one of the four descriptions, participants were asked to complete scales to measure their affect for the teacher and their perceptions of the teacher's credibility. The following measures were employed.

*Affect for teacher.* The Affective Learning Measure is an eight-item instrument that measures participants' affect for the teacher (McCroskey, 1994). This measure consists of four bipolar, seven-step items directed toward students' general attitude toward the teacher and four bipolar, seven-step items directed toward students' willingness to take a course with this teacher. This two-factor measure evaluating the teacher was analyzed both separately and as an overall combined, overall affect score. Previous reliability coefficients ranged from .89 to .98 (Frymier, 1994; Kearney, 1994; McCroskey, Fayer, Richmond, Sallinen, & Barraclough, 1996; Richmond, 1990; Sidelinger & McCroskey, 1997). In this study, the estimated alpha reliability for the combined measure was .93 ( $M=40.32$ ,  $SD=11.73$ , range = 8–56).

*Credibility of teacher.* Participants also completed the Source Credibility Measure (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). This 18-item, bipolar adjective scale measures three components of credibility: competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill/caring. Participants were instructed to circle the number that best represented how they felt about the described instructor. Previous alpha reliability coefficients around .90 have been reported (Teven & McCroskey, 1997). In this study, the estimated alpha reliability for each component of credibility was .90 for competence, .92 for

trustworthiness, and .90 for goodwill/caring (competence:  $M = 31.28$ ,  $SD = 7.87$ , range = 6–42; goodwill/caring:  $M = 29.22$ ,  $SD = 8.36$ , range = 6–42; trustworthiness:  $M = 29.96$ ,  $SD = 8.29$ , range = 6–42).

Data were analyzed by one-way analyses of variance. Multivariate analyses were not used because it was not anticipated that the independent variables would impact the dependent variables in the same ways. Each dependent variable was treated as a unique variable, addressed separately by each of the experimental conditions. Effect sizes for the experimental conditions on each dependent variable were estimated by  $\eta^2$ . Post hoc mean comparisons on the dependent variables were conducted to determine which experimental conditions produced significantly ( $p < .05$ ) different outcomes.

## Results

The first research question addressed the effect of teacher misbehaviors on affect for teacher. Three separate ANOVAs were computed with the three types of teacher misbehaviors as the independent variable (offensive, indolent, and incompetent) and each of the three affective measures as the dependent variable (combined or overall affect, affect for teacher, and willingness to take a course with the teacher). The result of the analysis of variance for the combined or overall teacher affect was statistically significant ( $F = 32.10$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .26$ ). Similarly, the results obtained from separate analyses of variance produced significant effects for affect for teacher ( $F = 34.41$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .27$ ) and willingness to take a course with that teacher ( $F = 22.81$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .20$ ).

For research question two, post hoc mean comparisons indicated that all three experimental conditions generated means significantly lower than the control condition on all measures of teacher affect (see Table 1). The offensiveness condition produced significantly lower scores on overall affect for teacher. Incompetence and offensiveness did not differ from each other on students' willingness to take a class from the teacher, but both scores were significantly lower than the control and the indolence conditions. Although the willingness to take a class with the teacher was significantly lower than the control condition, scores in the indolence condition were

**Table 1** Mean Affect and Credibility Scores for each Condition

Variables	Condition 1	Condition 2	Condition 3	Condition 4
	Control	Incompetence	Indolence	Offensiveness
Evaluation	25.00ab	19.57a	19.64b	16.72ab
Take Class	24.61ab	18.36a	20.53ab	16.49b
Total Affect	49.61ab	37.99a	40.29b	33.22b
Competence	37.93ab	27.21ab	30.41a	29.66b
Caring/Goodwill	36.52a	30.03a	27.17a	23.10a
Trustworthiness	36.59ab	30.56a	29.13b	23.41ab

*Note.* Means in the same row with the same letter are significantly different,  $p < .05$ .



significantly more positive than those in the incompetence and offensiveness conditions.

The third research question addressed the effects of teacher misbehavior type on student perceptions of teacher credibility. The results of the analyses of variance showed significant effects on competence ( $F = 31.89, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .25$ ), caring ( $F = 47.01, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .34$ ), and trustworthiness ( $F = 43.44, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .32$ ).

For research question four, post hoc mean comparisons indicated that all three experimental conditions generated means significantly lower than the control condition on all of the teacher credibility scores (see Table 1). The offensiveness condition had the largest negative impact on the goodwill/caring and trustworthiness scores. The incompetence condition produced significantly lower scores on competence than the indolence and offensiveness conditions. The indolence and offensiveness conditions produced some reduction in perceived competence scores, but did not differ significantly from each other. The incompetence and indolence conditions produced a substantial reduction in trustworthiness scores, but did not differ significantly from each other. In terms of negative impact on goodwill/caring scores, the three experimental conditions were all significantly different from each other. The most negative impact on goodwill/caring scores, then, was observed in the offensiveness condition. Incompetence produced the least reduction (although statistically significant from the control condition). Indolence scores were in between those for incompetence and offensiveness, and significantly different from both.

Supplementary correlational analyses revealed strong relationships between overall teacher affect and the three teacher credibility dimensions. Results indicate that students' overall affect for the teacher was significantly related to competence ( $r = .72, p < .0001$ ), caring ( $r = .69, p < .0001$ ), and trustworthiness ( $r = .73, p < .0001$ ).

## Discussion

Research questions one and two examined the impact of incompetent, indolent, and offensive teacher misbehaviors on student affect for the teacher. Results show that, while they do impact students' affect for the teacher, they impact it in different degrees. The offensive teacher negatively impacted students' affect for the teacher the most, followed by the incompetent teacher and then the indolent teacher. When looking at each individual affective measure, teacher misbehaviors impacted them differently. For both affective factors, affect for teacher and taking another class from that teacher, the offensive teacher had the greatest negative impact. A teacher who was described as engaging in offensive misbehaviors was evaluated less positively, and students reported being less willing to take a course with that teacher.

Incompetence and indolence had similar consequences for students' affect for the teacher. Each impacted their evaluations negatively but with neither impacting more than the other. For the second factor, willingness to take a class with the teacher, there was a difference between incompetence and indolence. Compared to the indolent teacher, students indicated that they would be less likely to take a class from the

incompetent teacher. These results demonstrate that some teacher misbehaviors probably should be considered more serious than others.

Research questions three and four examined the influence of incompetent, indolent, and offensive teacher misbehaviors on student perceptions of teacher credibility. Results indicated that students perceived the experimental teachers to be less credible when any of the three types of misbehavior was present. However, the three components of teacher credibility were impacted differently by each teacher misbehavior type. As one might expect, students' perceptions of teacher competence were affected most by incompetent teacher misbehaviors, followed by offensive and then indolent teacher misbehaviors.

Misbehaving teachers in the experimental conditions were also perceived to be less caring than the teacher in the control condition who did not misbehave. The offensive teacher was perceived to be the least caring, followed by the indolent and then the incompetent teacher. Predictably, offensive teachers show less concern for students' feelings. Teachers who are offensive tend to degrade or belittle students, use sarcasm to get their point across, and become rude or aggressive.

Teachers' trustworthiness was also impacted by all of the teacher misbehavior types. Overall, teacher offensiveness had the greatest negative impact on the students' perceptions of teacher trust, followed by indolence and then incompetence. The likelihood that a teacher would be perceived as trustworthy should diminish as the misbehaviors of belittling students, making rude or condescending remarks, or engaging in other offensive behaviors increased. Attacking students personally is unlikely to build or sustain any level of student/teacher trust.

Overall, this research found that teachers' credibility and students' affect for the teacher were impacted by teacher misbehaviors. Clearly, the teacher misbehavior conditions employed in this research, compared to the control condition, had a negative impact on all of the dependent variables studied. Because the dependent variables were highly correlated, particularly teacher affect with teacher credibility, we can reasonably predict that both will be influenced by teacher misbehaviors in the classroom.

Whereas previous research focused on individual teacher communication misbehaviors, this study employed three types of misbehavior representing a long list of individual misbehaviors (Kearney et al., 1991). Because each type of misbehavior seemed to uniquely influence how students perceived their teachers, future research should employ all three misbehavior types in our efforts to understand the differential effects of teacher misbehaviors on other important instructional outcomes (see, for instance, Berkos, Allen, Kearney, & Plax, 2001; Kelsey, Kearney, Plax, Allen, & Ritter, 2004).

A limitation of the present study is its experimental nature. While this type of research is needed to establish causality, future research should examine teachers in a naturalistic environment. A study using fictional teachers, such as this one, has unknown validity in the real instructional environment. For example, it is reasonable to question if teachers really participate in the behaviors that were depicted in the study. That is, do teachers only participate in one type of misbehavior (we doubt it),



and is it at the level that was portrayed in this study (we do not know)? Hence, the generalizability of the results in the present investigation must be determined in subsequent research. By examining real teachers and observing real behaviors, researchers should be able to determine the prevalence and influence of such misbehaviors and begin to address how school systems might handle these problems.

Another limitation of this study is that we did not address how misbehaviors directly impact teaching. Instead, we examined how misbehaviors influence the credibility of teachers and the students' affect for their teachers. Because we did not look at cognitive learning outcomes, further research is needed to determine the actual impact misbehaviors have on learning. With this research, teachers would be able to apply the results to their actual teaching and be more likely to accomplish their instructional goals.

In spite of these limitations, this research once again emphasizes the importance of teacher misbehaviors on students' perceptions. Previous research has found that misbehaviors often go unidentified and are largely ignored by educational organizations (Kearney et al., 1991). Acknowledging that misbehaviors happen is a step in the right direction, as is research of the type reported here. Identifying the negative correlates and outcomes of teacher misbehaviors is a step in the right direction. Ultimately, it is important that we determine the causes of these misbehaviors and find ways to reduce them.

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