Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of the Communication Behaviors of Their Advisors and Perceptions of Relational Satisfaction

Narissra Punyanunt-Carter [a, *] and Stacy Carter [b]

[a] Department of Communication Studies, Texas Tech University, USA
[b] College of Education, Texas Tech University, USA

Abstract: This study examined the specific interpersonal communication styles and behaviors of advisors and the expectations they have on their advisee's level of satisfaction, as well as what characteristics lead to higher relational satisfaction in the advisor-advisee relationship. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling were utilized to obtain participants for this study. Three hundred and ninety-seven college students voluntarily completed a survey on their current advisor. The instruments used relied on the Sociocommunicative Style Scale created by Richmond and McCroskey (1985), and on the Relational Satisfaction Scale created by Beatty and Dobos (1992). Results revealed that there is a significant relationship between sociocommunicative style and relationship satisfaction. The authors note as study limitations the lack of qualitative data, the randomness of the sample, and the large proportion of female participants that resulted from the random sample. The authors conclude that by further studying variables within the advisee-advisor relationship, advisors can learn how to communicate better in order to have a satisfying and beneficial relationship with their advisees. Additionally, advisees can learn what to expect from advisement and how to attain satisfying relationships with their advisors.

Key words: Satisfaction, advisor-advisee relationship, interpersonal communication

Introduction

Undergraduate academic advising can be a beneficial undertaking for many college students' success and achievement (Kramer, 2003; Mastrodicasa, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Tinto (1987) found that interactions with undergraduate advisors have an impact on students' satisfaction. It can also have an impact on the school's retention rate. Ender (1994) discovered a significant relationship between students who had better undergraduate advisor relationships and higher retention rates. The current study examined the specific interpersonal communication styles and behaviors of advisors and the expectations they have on their advisee's level of satisfaction.

Undergraduate Advisor-Advisee Relationships

Crookston (1972) focused on two kinds of academic advising: prescriptive and developmental. Prescriptive advising involves an advisor imposing institutional rules to the student. The prescriptive advising approach occurs when the interpersonal relationship is not naturally formed between the student and the advisor. The advisor acts as the expert by providing instructions and knowledge to the student advisee. The student primarily asks questions and follows the directions provided by the advisor without necessarily developing a personal relationship with the advisor.

Developmental advising is formed naturally between the student and the advisor. This approach focuses on fostering the professional growth of the advisee by allowing them to

explore their own ideas and make their own decisions with the assistance of a knowledgeable advisor. It focuses on openness and trust between the advisor and advisee in order to develop a reciprocal relationship. Crookston (1972) noted that advising is similar to teaching since the student will cultivate results for themselves, their peers, and their surroundings.

The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) has encouraged the practice of developmental advising over prescriptive advising, because it allows the advisee a better educational experience yet most academic institutions do not offer developmental advising to undergraduate students (Pardee, 1994). Ender (1994) and Gordon (1994) noted that there are several reasons why developmental advising does not occur at the undergraduate level, such as time, training, and lack of comprehension about developmental advising. Developmental advising tends to occur at the graduate level due to students' interests and attitudes toward a specific advisor. It is important to note the graduate level advising is often different as the advisor is supervising faculty.

Gordon and Habley (2000) noted that undergraduate academic advisors are among the first collegiate members to communicate with students and provide students with valuable resources. Past research revealed that undergraduate students need effective academic advising to succeed in college (Kramer, 2003; Mastrodicasa, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Tinto (1987) found that interactions with undergraduate advisors have an impact on students' satisfaction with the school and retention rate. Similarly, Ender (1994) discovered a significant relationship between students who had better undergraduate advisor relationships and higher retention rates among those same students. Based on these findings, it appears that undergraduate advisors may have a substantial impact on their undergraduate advisees.

Creeden (1990) found that numerous undergraduate students were dissatisfied with their academic advisors due to perception differences about advising between advisors and their advisees. The top two areas that students wanted to discuss with their advisors were career options/goals and life goals while advisors reported that they did not feel that career counseling was a part of their responsibilities. The advisors who responded indicated that they believed they were responsible only for class selection and class drop/add procedures. It appears that undergraduate advisors and advisees perceptions of what should take place during advising may differ substantially. Advising has often been viewed as an inconsequential task or chore required by faculty rather than an opportunity to foster students' professional and personal growth (Tuttle, 2000). Kuhtmann (2004) mentioned that there has been a recent trend among academic institutions to increase the effectiveness and scope of undergraduate advising in order to have satisfactory relationships and higher retention rates.

Socio-Communicative Orientation and Style

As documented by one of the authors in previous research, Bem (1974) began examining psychological gender orientation. In her theorizing of psychological gender, Bem measured two constructs, masculinity and femininity, using a scale she created called the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI). The BSRI was originally constructed by having different groups of participants read a list of adjectives and determine which characteristics on the list were seen as more desirable in the United States for one biological sex or the other. After participants rated these lists, Bem computed 400 *t*-tests to determine 20 items ranked by females and males to be more desirable for a man (masculine scale) and 20 items ranked by females and males to be more desirable for a woman (feminine scale) (see Punyanunt-Carter, Wrench, & Nance, 2014).

Also documented in a prior publication, Richmond and McCroskey (1985, 1990) believed that the BSRI's conceptualizations of "feminine" and "masculine" were really just poorly labeled conceptualizations of actual communicative behavior. Instead of being marginalized with one biological sex, the authors believed that the more descriptive terms responsive (for feminine) and assertive (for masculine) communication styles was more accurate of what was being measured by the BSRI. Ultimately, what came out of Richmond and McCroskey's work were two new scales, called the Sociocommunicative Orientation (an individual's innate tendency to communicate responsively or assertively) and Sociocommunicative Style Scales (an individual's perception of another person's communicative behavior as either responsive or assertive) (see Punyanunt-Carter et al., 2014).

Responsiveness refers to an individual who "considers other's feelings, listens to what others have to say, and recognizes the needs of others" (Richmond & Martin, 1998, 136-37). The ten items that are used by Richmond and McCroskey (1985) to measure assertiveness are: helpful, responsive to others, sympathetic, compassionate, sensitive to the needs of others, sincere, gentle, warm, tender, and friendly (as previously documented in Punyanunt-Carter et al., 2014). Conversely, assertive communicators "are able to initiate, maintain, and terminate conversations, according to their interpersonal goals" (p. 136). The ten items that are used by Richmond and McCroskey (1985) to measure assertiveness are: defends own beliefs, independent, forceful, has strong personality, assertive, dominant, willing to take a stand, acts as a leader, aggressive, and competitive (see also Punyanunt-Carter et al., 2014).

As previously documented by Brogan, Fiore, and Wrench (2009), a study completed by Thompson, Klopf, and Ishii (1990) compared American and Japanese socio-communication orientations and found that U.S. females reported higher responsiveness levels than the Japanese females, but there was no difference in responsiveness between U.S. males and Japanese males. When examining assertiveness, the researchers found that U.S. females and males were more assertive than Japanese females and males. They found that cross-culturally females were more responsive and males were more assertive. This general pattern was also seen in Chinese sample (Anderson, Martin, Zhong, & West, 1997) and a Russian sample (Christophel, 1996).

As documented by Brogan et al. (2009), "[o]utside of the intercultural examination of sociocommunicative orientation, research has also been conducted on the influence of sociocommunicative orientation and style in the classroom" (Brogan et al., 2009). Most of the research looking at sociocommunicative orientation and style in the classroom has primarily studied the impact that a teacher's sociocommunicative style (as perceived by her or his students) in the college classroom (2009). Research has found that a teacher's assertiveness and responsiveness positively relates to student perceptions of nonverbal immediacy (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994) and student perceptions of teacher trustworthiness (Wooten & McCroskey, 1996). Research by Wanzer and McCroskey (1998) found a negative relationship between a teacher's sociocommunicative style and student perceptions of teacher misbehaviors. Aylor and Oppliger (2003) found that students were more likely to communicate with highly responsive teachers out of class, and students were more satisfied with their communication with highly responsive teachers.

Satisfaction

Another key component of the advisor-advisee relationship is satisfaction. For the purposes of this study, the focus was primarily on relational satisfaction. Dainton, Stafford,

and Canary (1994) defined relational satisfaction as "an individual's attitude toward the partner and the relationship, typically in terms of the perceived quality of the relationship" (p. 90). Hecht (1978b) proposed that satisfaction is based on expectations and explained that satisfaction is an internal reinforcer. Hecht believed that communication satisfaction is the fulfillment of expectations. Thus, ratings of satisfaction can be assessed by analyzing levels of relational and communication satisfaction.

Communication is essential to relational satisfaction (Dindia, 1994; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Satisfaction of a relationship is due to how effective and frequent communication is with the other person (Dindia, 1994). Negative perceptions of satisfaction affect the long-term stability of the relationship (Gottman & Carrere, 1994). Martin and Anderson (1995) reasoned that if the relationship is not satisfactory, then the relationship may be terminated. Thus, both relational and communication satisfaction will be analyzed in this study.

Satisfaction is an outcome gained from perceptions of the communication interaction (Spitzberg & Hecht, 1984). The greater the interaction, the higher the level of relationship satisfaction (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Hinde (1997) agreed, stating that satisfaction is related to communication and the attributions of the communication. Based on this research, not only the type of communication, but the amount of communication is associated with satisfaction.

Dindia (2000) stated that, "relational satisfaction is the most common conceptual and operational definition of relational maintenance, and the correlation between maintenance strategies and relational satisfaction has been examined in several studies" (p. 292). Researchers have found that relationship satisfaction was linked with perceptions of the partner's relationship maintenance behaviors (Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Thus, there is a relationship between maintenance behaviors and satisfaction.

Based on these previous findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1:   There is not a positive relationship between advisee perceptions of her or his advisor's sociocommunicative style (assertiveness & responsiveness) and advisee relationship satisfaction with her or his advisor.

Method

Procedures and Participants

A combination of convenience and snowball sampling were utilized to obtain participants for this study. Undergraduates were invited to participate in this project via solicitations on a campus listserv and university professors were encouraged to pass along the invitation to participate to their undergraduate students. The invitation email included a link to the survey web site. After clicking on the link, potential participants were taken to the consent page. Participants were then asked to click on the link to if they consented to participate in the study. Participation was completely voluntary and no incentive was given.

This method yielded 397 (out of a possible 500) undergraduate student participants. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the respondents. The sample consisted of 204 (51.4%) females, 193 (48.6%) males. The sample was primarily Anglo Saxon/Caucasian (337 or 85%). The study also consisted of 31 (7.9%) first year students, 67 (17.3%) sophomores, 84 (21%) juniors, 198 (50%) seniors, and 12 (3.7%) participants who did not respond to the

year-in-school classification question. The participants were asked to give some basic demographic characteristics of their major advisors as well (see Table 2). The respondents reported having 274 (69.6%) female advisors and 123 (30.4%) male advisors. Participants were also asked about approximately how old their advisors were: 70 (17.8%) had advisors under 25, 151 (38.3%) had advisors between the ages of 25 and 30, 70 (17.8%) had advisors between the ages of 31 and 40, 51 (13.6%) had advisors between the ages of 41 and 50, 30 (7.9%) had advisors between the ages of 51 and 60, 1 (.5%) had an advisor over the age of 60, and 14 (3.7%) did not respond to this question. 308 (77.6%) of the advisors were Anglo Saxon/Caucasian, 47 (12.1%) were Asian American, 14 (3.7%) were Hispanic/Latino, 7 (1.9%) were African-Americans, 9 (2.3%) selected their advisor's ethnicity as "other," and 9 (2.3%) did not respond to the question.

Instrumentation

Sociocommunicative Style. The Sociocommunicative Style scale was created by Richmond and McCroskey (1985) as an instructional tool to examine the extent to which individuals use assertive or responsive communication. The instrument was first utilized in research by Thompson, Ishii, and Klopf to examine cultural differences in assertive and responsive communication (Thompson et al., 1990; Ishii et al., 1990). After the publication of these two articles, Richmond and McCroskey (1990) demonstrated the reliability and dimensionality of the measure itself. The sociocommunicative orientation scale consists of ten items on each factor for a total of twenty items. Participants are asked to respond to short descriptive phrases that range from one to five words in length that indicate ways in which they perceive their advisors communicating. Two categories are determined: assertiveness (M = 35.84, SD = 5.78) and responsiveness (M= 40.12, SD = 5.55). The measure asks a participant to respond in terms of how well the items applies to her or him using a Likert scale from (1) *strongly disagree that it applies* to (5) *strongly agree that it applies*. Alpha reliabilities for this scale were .90 for assertiveness and .93 for responsiveness.

Relational Satisfaction Scale. The Relational Satisfaction Scale was created by Beatty and Dobos (1992) to measure the extent to which an individual is satisfied with her or his interpersonal relationship with another individual. The scale consists of six oppositely worded adjective pairs with seven steps. For this study, advisees were asked to rate their relational satisfaction with their advisors. The alpha reliability for this scale was .93. The mean was 27.99 and the standard deviation was 6.23.

Results

The null hypothesis predicted that advisor's sociocommunicative style (assertiveness & responsiveness) would not relate to advisee relationship satisfaction with her or his advisor. Simple linear multiple regression was calculated using assertiveness and responsiveness as the independent variables and relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable. A significant linear relationship was noted between advisor sociocommunicative style and relationship satisfaction, F (2, 368) = 16.95, p < .0005. The sample multiple correlation coefficient, R, was .31, which indicates that approximately 8.8% of the variance of an advisee's relationship satisfaction with her or his advisor could be accounted for by the linear combination of advisor assertiveness (t = 2.41, p < .05, β = .12) and responsiveness (t = 5.23, p < .0005, β = .24).

Regressions were also run to see if demographic differences existed among the variables. Results revealed no significant differences among the demographic variables and

satisfaction. Results also revealed no significant differences among the demographic variables and sociocommunicative style.

Discussion

The current study was designed to examine the relationships between advisor sociocommunicative style and advisee relationship satisfaction with her or his advisor. The hypothesis predicted relationships between an advisor's sociocommunicative style (assertiveness & responsiveness) and relationship satisfaction was supported by the findings in this study. As Crookston (1972) noted, mentoring involves to levels of orientation: prescriptive oriented (focused on rules) and developmental oriented (focused on professional growth). An advisor could be either highly assertive/responsive or lowly assertive/responsive and still accomplish both levels of advising. As for the significant relationships between advisor sociocommunicative style and advisee relationship satisfaction and motivation, the results are very similar accounting for a small portion of the variance in both variables. This reasoning for the responses probably stems from their common ground in learning affect (Richmond, Wrench, & Gorham, 2001). In essence, previous research has demonstrated that highly assertive and responsive teachers increase affective learning, which in turn positively relates to both student satisfaction and student motivation (Richmond et al., 2001). This is important for advisors to take into account so that they are able to increase higher levels of relational satisfaction with their advisees.

Interestingly, there were no differences among the demographic variables and satisfaction. This could be due to the fact that males and females want similar characteristics in an advisor and the sex of the advisor/advisee does not impact perceptions of the relationship. Moreover, there were no differences among demographic variables and perceptions of sociocommunicative style. Again, one could assume that demographics such as age, race, or classification do not impact perceptions of assertiveness or responsiveness. All and all, this is a noteworthy result, because it implies that these characteristics can transcend to both males and females.

Limitations

There are a few limitations that must be discussed concerning the current study. First, the method used in this study to recruit research participants was completely random and could have influenced the results. It is entirely possible, that this study did not yield a representative sample of the entire population of undergraduate students. Because participation was completely voluntary, only specific students that were either completely satisfied or unsatisfied chose to participate. This was a convenient sample. In addition, snowball sampling was used. Hence, participants could voluntarily select if they wanted to participate or not. It might have been beneficial to get as many possible participants to see if there were any differences.

Another limitation was the method in which this information was collected. It might have been more fruitful to collect qualitative data as well. Qualitative data would allow for more descriptions and interpretations of the advisees' perceptions about their advisor.

The third limitation to this study was that the characteristics of the sample. Many of the participants were women and a large portion of the sample reported on a female advisor. Because females tend to be relationship oriented, this might have affected the outcome of the study.

Because females are more likely to perceive relational satisfaction, they are also more likely to report it. For that reason, the results may not be generalizable to all advisor-advisee relationships.

Conclusion

This investigation furthers a research program that examines advisor-advisee communicative relationships. The advisee-advisor relationship is an untapped and needed line of communication research that should be further examined so that we can understand how to improve these types of relationships. Future possible avenues of research should include areas such as organizational identification and assimilation, conflict-management, and further interpersonal communication variables that could possibly impact the advisor-advisee relationship. By further studying variables within the advisee-advisor relationship, advisors can learn how to communicate better in order to have a satisfying and beneficial relationship with their advisees. Additionally, advisees can learn what to expect from advisement and how to attain satisfying relationships with their advisors.

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Appendix A - Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	Total	Percent
Gender		
Female	204	51.4%
Male	193	48.6%
Race		
Caucasian	337	85%
Asian	-	-
Latino/Hispanic	-	-
African American	-	-
Other	-	-
Classification		
Freshman	31	7.9%
Sophomore	67	17.3%
Junior	84	21%
Senior	198	50%
Not specified	12	3.7%

Appendix B - Characteristics of Advisors

Characteristics	Total	Percent
Gender		
Female	274	69.6%
Male	123	30.4%
Age		
Under 25	70	17.8%
Between 25 and 30	151	38.3%
Between 31-40	70	17.8%
Between 41-50	51	13.6%
Between 51-60	30	7.9%
Over 60	1	0.5%
Not Specified	14	3.7%